



# *Escapade*

*by Naomi Rankin*

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To Bob, who puts up with all this

Illustration: Vigee Le Brun, Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat (age 22) - 1782

Oil on canvas, 97.8 x 70.5 cm

National Gallery, London

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## Chapter 1

Of the many blessings of a numerous family of children, a certain social self-sufficiency ranks high. An adequate group of sons will supply a good deal of its own entertainment from within its own ranks, tripping each other up and wrestling, exchanging insults, and above all daring each other to acts of devilry, without being unduly anxious to retain the good opinion of outsiders. With the passage of time such incitements become almost automatic, with a mere exchange of glances being sufficient to invoke the spirit of mischief.

It was a fine late summer's day when Matthew, Jonas, William and Daniel Loftus, the Squire's sons, were lounging before their own stables and perceived their nearest neighbour riding towards them.

"There's Bob Arkwright again," Matt said. "What is it makes him come round so often? He has already had two of my father's bitches, what more can he want?"

"I cannot tell," said Will. "Why do you not ask him?"

"Mr. Arkwright, sir," said Matt, nothing loathe. "May a gentleman inquire what is it draws you to us so often? I do not think my father's brandy any better than yours."

"Dear boys, can you not guess? I hope to be your brother by Michaelmas," said Mr. Arkwright. Matt, Dan and Will gaped at him in just the gratifying manner he had hoped. Jonas, quicker than his brothers, passed his hand before his face, the better to disguise an involuntary smirk. "Yes," Mr. Arkwright continued. "Your father and I have been in consultation some time already. We are almost agreed I shall have your sister to wife."

"But, Mr. Arkwright," said Will, "have you spoke to Amelia?"

"Why would I do that? I have your father's favour, 'tis all that is necessary."

Matt and Jonas looked at each other.

“Why, not at all, sir,” said Jonas. “Do you not know that there is a new fashion? You will be much laughed at, sir, if you do not ask my sister yourself first, before she is commanded to it by my father.”

“Laughed at! Why should I be laughed at?”

“It is now-a-days considered quite unmanly not to hazard yourself with the lady, sir,” said Jonas. “A gentleman who lets his father-in-law undertake all the work of wooing and winning on his behalf is looked upon as quite craven. Mr. Harper over at Lonsgate could hardly show his face in town for a week when it was known he had Miss Betty Greenwood bestowed on him without her knowledge.”

“Craven! I will not submit to that, sir,” Bob Arkwright cried. “I will not be compared with Mr. Harper.”

“Well, then, away with you, sir, to Amelia and be at your courting yourself,” said Matt.

“I will indeed,” said Bob Arkwright. “Gentlemen, I thank you, I should not otherwise have known.” And he turned forthwith to knock upon their front door, rather than to seek out Squire Loftus in the kennels as he had originally intended. Matt, Jonas, Dan and Will waited until Mr. Arkwright had been admitted, and the door had well closed behind him, to burst out in uproarious laughter.

No further exchange of words was required amongst them to determine them to run round to peer in the window of the ladies' sitting room, to see for themselves the progress of Mr. Arkwright's attempt upon the maidenly sensibilities of their only sister. They reached their vantage point just as the ardent suitor was ushered in, and they were further enlivened to observe that Amelia was alone in the room to receive the frankest expression of Mr. Arkwright's ardour, and that the window was open to permit them to hear.

“Well, Miss Loftus, I've had my eye on you for some time,” Mr. Arkwright said. “You're a fine dashing filly, and want only a

masterful fellow in the saddle. What say you?"

"Whatever do you mean, Mr. Arkwright?" said Miss Loftus. Her brothers could easily perceive that she was considerably astonished and somewhat ruffled.

"Why, damn-me, Miss Loftus, I'm popping the question. What else would I mean?"

"I'm sure I've no idea, Mr. Arkwright." Miss Loftus was here guilty of a little dissembling, for she had already a quite precise idea, which was that for no consideration would she ever marry such a rough and loutish man, distinguished even among her father's cronies for his vulgarity of address.

"Come, come, Miss Amelia. You may be as coy as you like, but I'm sure you can have no objection, so why do we not tie the knot immediately?"

"Indeed, sir, you can hardly be so assured of anyone's intentions – and clearly you are utterly mistaken as to mine."

"What a spirited little filly she is!" cried Mr. Arkwright, reaching out to embrace her. Amelia jabbed him in the fleshy part of the thumb with her needle, and left the room. So prompt was her withdrawal that she heard nothing of the suppressed laughter outside the window.

Amelia went quickly down the passageway leading to the kitchen and offices, to seek the protection of her mother's presence. She waited only until the flush of annoyance had faded from her cheeks before entering the still room, and saying,

"Maman, I have come to see whether you might need some help. So many bramble-berries as there have been this year!"

"Why, yes, my dear, how thoughtful of you. I declare, we must have a still-room maid, but Squire will not hear of any more expense. How ever are you to have any prospects if you are to be

always at work? I must speak to your father. This time I shall be quite insistent. Truly I shall.”

Amelia made no reply. Her mother had always some such plaintive litany on her lips, and some such desperate resolution.

Had Miss Amelia even wished to speak, she would have been interrupted, for from the front part of the house came a bellow of inarticulate rage and mortification. Mr. Arkwright had comprehended that he was rejected.

“What is it?” cried Mrs. Loftus, appalled.

“Oh, never mind, maman. It is only Mr. Arkwright,” Amelia said.

“Mr. Arkwright? Why should he make such a sound?”

“He behaved very impudently,” Amelia said. Seeing her mother's stricken look, she added soothingly, “But I gave him a sufficient hint, I think, that he will make no more bother.”

In this, Amelia was overly optimistic. Mr. Arkwright was disinclined to force his way into the humbler part of the house to renew his tête-a-tête with Amelia, but he betook himself to the stable to unburden his soul to the Squire.

For the first time in living memory, Miss Amelia was summoned to her father's room. Mrs. Loftus, in the extremity of her maternal devotion, followed along behind, uttering little cries of dismay. Her fear of displeasing her husband was such, however, that she dared not enter the room unbidden. Caught between the desire to shield Amelia and an equally strong urge to flee, she was constrained to effect a compromise by listening at the keyhole.

“Confound it, girl, what are you about?” Squire Loftus began, after sundry grunts and gasps.

“Nothing, father,” said Amelia.

“Nothing! You call it nothing to be playing the jade with Rob Arkwright? Let me tell you, my girl, if you put on such airs and hold yourself so distant, you're like to put him off in the end.”

“But I wanted to put him off,” Amelia said serenely.

“Wanted to put him off? How are you to marry him if you go putting him off?”

“Father, I have no wish to marry Mr. Arkwright.”

“No wish to marry Mr. Arkwright!” her father repeated in the last degree of astonishment. “No wish to Marry Mr. Arkwright?” said he, rising to indignation. “No wish to marry Mr. Arkwright!” he thundered. “Bob Arkwright, whom I've known from a boy, who's the keenest man after a fox, with the finest stable and the hardest head in the county. Not wish to marry Mr. Arkwright! I don't know what the country is coming to. It's only to be expected, I suppose, with men who can't say what their fathers were, running the government. No wish to marry Mr. Arkwright,” he said, subsiding to indignation again. He eyed his daughter and spluttered, “No wish to marry Mr. Arkwright,” in a renewal of astonishment.

“Well, father, since I neither hunt nor drink, his qualities do not recommend him to me,” Amelia said. I fear she so far forgot what was lady-like as to be even a little sarcastic, but fortunately her father had no very clear notion of what sarcasm was.

“Neither hunt nor drink?” said he. “Of course not. You're a woman, I'll have you know.”

“I do know it, father,” Amelia said. “So I can tell you quite assuredly from a woman's point of view that there is hardly a man in the county who would not be a more acceptable suitor than Mr. Arkwright. So pray let us be done with it.”

Outside on the landing Mrs. Loftus trembled at this bold speech, but no explosion followed. The Squire was in truth too amazed to

do anything but sputter at his daughter, growing redder and more puffed up with each little “humph”, like one of Mr. Watt's curious engines.

“I'll tell you what, my girl,” the Squire said at length. “If you take it into your head to go on refusing all such offers you will never get a husband at all. Don't look to me to keep you if you are so very nice.” Miss Amelia deigned no reply but a saucy toss of the head. “It's that weasel-faced woman putting ideas into your head,” the Squire said darkly.

As a description of Amelia's governess, it was fair enough in one light, for Miss Smythe was not fortunate in the contours of her features, and did resemble the animal aforementioned. In another light it was most imperceptive, for Miss Smythe was a woman of such a character and such an intelligence as should have shielded her from such remarks. But in its import it was quite true. It was indeed Miss Smythe who had put ideas into Amelia's head, and so thoroughly that there was nearly always at least one of those seditious items operating in that young lady's brain. Amelia at that moment was thinking that she might do better to run off to London and seek a situation as a domestic, as it would assuredly bring her into closer contact with the world of culture and refinement than she would ever come by marrying in her own circle.

“I am sorry we are not in agreement, father,” she said.

“Sorry!” he said. “What good does it do me for you to be sorry? It's high time you were married, my fine lady, and I mean to see that you are. There will be no more refusing of offers in my house. I don't know what the world is coming to. Do you suppose your mother would ever have refused an eligible offer, all on her own account?”

“No, father, I am sure she would not,” Amelia said, choking down a sudden surge of pity.

“Would you rather end up like That Woman then?” Squire Loftus demanded, once more unmistakably designating Miss Smythe.



Amelia made no reply, for she knew that heartfelt assent would only goad her father into blasphemous utterances.

Squire Loftus lived as his forefathers had before him, hunting his foxes and drinking his port with his neighbours and sons. As each son reached the age of incipient manhood, the Squire's paternal care was focused upon him, teaching him the gentlemanly arts of overfacing his horses and carousing to excess, damning the government and talking bawdily of dogs and women, and purging him of such unseemly habits as reading for pleasure, or conversing with wit, which he might have picked up from too much debilitating contact with females. By the year of 1782, three sons already had undergone this initiation, each more like the father than the last, and the fourth was now being launched upon it with every appearance of like success.

The undermining females of the Loftus family were three – Mrs. Loftus, a querulously resigned woman; her daughter Amelia, fast approaching woman's estate; and Miss Zenobia Smythe, who for twenty pounds a year continued to instruct Amelia in useless refinements.

Although the male and female branches of the family met to dine each day, outdoor pursuits absorbed the Squire's time each morning and he would have thought it lowering to his dignity to have left the dining room except in a state of advanced intoxication, to stumble up to his bed. The three ladies, therefore, lived almost like nuns, attending perhaps three assemblies in the year, where a dearth of conformable gentlemen kept them seated against a wall for three dances out of every four.

Miss Loftus grew up in this narrow circle as much devoted to acquiring accomplishments as might be expected with no other audience but her mother and her governess ever likely to applaud them, becoming expert in household cares and needlework, and not supposing that men were good for anything but providing vexatious interruptions to their quiet diligence.

The novels which came to enliven their long country evenings

were rare – as rare as the fashionable intelligence which came so far north, wending its way in most leisurely fashion, taking sometimes a month and sometimes two years to reach them. Miss Loftus, therefore, was as ignorant of the propensity of noble young lords to marry obscure and deserving heroines as she was innocent of the odd effect her toilette would have produced in London. Nothing had ever occurred to encourage any romantic flights of fancy in her, and she thought of love or marriage as seldom as any young lady of twenty well could.

There was, however, a dark secret in her past which had given a sinister turn to her whole character. Her second brother Jonas, four years her senior, had been much amused at the novel idea of teaching her to ride – but not in the manner seemly to a female. Indeed, had they attempted to acquire a lady's side-saddle or a suitably subdued mare, the whole project could not have been kept from Squire's knowledge. So from the age of nine years old, she had been secretly astride a horse in defiance of all precepts of feminine decorum, and how this corruption of her delicacy would influence her fate was yet entirely unknown.

## **Chapter 2**

The house was still in an uproar when Miss Smythe returned from works of charity.

“Oh, Miss Smythe, Squire's in ever such a taking,” said Martha, the chambermaid. That is, her position was dignified with the title of chambermaid, but as with all the other females in the house, domestics as well as ladies, she was expected to put her hand to whatever tasks presented themselves, without much regard for status. The general category of womankind was not much differentiated in Squire's eyes. “Mr. Arkwright made Miss Amelia an offer and she refused him!”

“There's no need for you to be remarking upon it, Martha,” said Miss Smythe. She passed over her basket into Martha's keeping. “Had Miss Amelia accepted him, it would have been a great misfortune and food for gossip, but as it is, it is no more than

another act of foolish presumption by a presumptuous fool.”

She went into the ladies' sitting room. Mrs. Loftus and Amelia were both there. The elder lady was considerably agitated, but one glance was enough to assure Miss Smythe that Amelia was uncowed.

“Well, my dear, I hear you have had some excitement this morning,” Miss Smythe said placidly. She sat down and took up her needlework.

“Oh, Miss Smythe, I am greatly feared Squire will continue unreasonable,” Mrs. Loftus began.

“Be he never so unreasonable he can hardly drag Amelia to the altar by force,” Miss Smythe said. “Some little unpleasantness will be a small price to pay to be quit of Mr. Arkwright's company.”

“But what are we to do?” Mrs. Loftus said. “Squire declares he will see her married, and if not to Mr. Arkwright, it is like to be to someone equally – equally unpleasant.”

“It could not be to anyone so unpleasant as Mr. Arkwright, for there is no one so unpleasant as he,” Amelia said. “But I am quite determined not to marry anyone even half so unpleasant. Squire may rumble and threaten as much as he chooses.”

Miss Smythe nodded in approval of this robust resolution.

“Indeed, my dear, I hope you will not marry anyone who is unpleasant at all,” she said.

“But there is no one in the district at all to my liking,” Amelia said.

“Then you must go out of the district,” Miss Smythe said. “I have been thinking so for some time. You should go to London for a season and see something more of the world before you are bottled up here forever.”

“London,” Amelia repeated, her eyes sparkling. Miss Smythe had resided for many years in London, and many were the wonders of which she had spoken.

“But how is she to get to London?” Mrs. Loftus said. “Squire will never agree to go there. And even if she does go for a season, if she does not get a husband by the end of it, she must come back here and be worse off than ever!”

“Oh, if I could but go, even for half a season!” Amelia said. “I would not mind not getting a husband. At least I should have seen real society!”

Miss Smythe looked at her but said nothing. Privately she thought that so pretty a girl could not help but get a husband, if she was not tongue-tied in company. Also she thought that Amelia showed her youth in not realizing how much more dismal home would appear in contrast, if she once tasted the delights of more refined society. Miss Smythe realized it full well, for she had known bitter exile for ten years. But no complaint had ever passed her lips, and Amelia knew only the tenth part of her governess' stoicism.

Miss Smythe was the daughter of a ruined gentleman. She had been snatched away from civilization and cast into the wilderness to earn her own bread at the age of five-and-twenty. Her delight in society had always been checkered, for she had early understood that with such a face as it had pleased Providence to bestow upon her, and such height, she was unlikely to marry. But she had cultivated her wit and improved her mind, and had had the entrée into literary circles, when suddenly all was ended. Had Miss Smythe had even a bare competence and a pretty sister, she might have had a home with her sister and brother-in-law. Had she had a bare competence and a plain sister, she might have at least dwelt in decorous peace with her sister in some little cottage. But as she had no competence at all and no sister of any description, she had been turned out into harsh exile to be Amelia's governess. For ten years she had taught her charge and taken her share in household duties, never resenting the Squire's affronts, neither intentional nor unintentional, setting an example of unblemished dignity which

Amelia was quick enough to realize was the most valuable part of her education.

After ten years Miss Smythe's position was more precarious than ever before, for Amelia was beyond the need of a governess, and she might at any moment be given her notice. Miss Smythe could not deny that Amelia marrying well was her own main hope of her future maintenance. She had no doubt but that Amelia would house her with attentive generosity, were she able to do so. But as far as she could, Miss Smythe suppressed all thought of self, and gave thanks that her darling showed no sign of falling into the abyss that Mr. Arkwright had that morning invited her to enter.

“There is no point in foolish fancies,” Miss Smythe said at length. “If you are indeed sent to London, your aim must be to find a better husband than you could find here. For if you do not, you will get nothing from your visit but regrets that it is ended. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Miss Smythe,” Amelia said, soberly enough that Miss Smythe was satisfied that she did, in part, understand.

“But how is she to get to London?” Mrs. Loftus repeated. “I know Squire's sister once invited her, but that was four years ago, and he was adamant then.”

“You must induce Mrs. Catchlove to renew her invitation,” Miss Smythe said. “And then, my dear Mrs. Loftus, you must assert yourself, and prevail upon Squire to let Amelia go. It is her one chance in life you are fighting for.” Miss Smythe seemed not to notice how Mrs. Loftus paled at this. “Let us hope Mrs. Catchlove is aptly named.”

Dinner was that day enlivened by a running commentary by the Squire on his ignorance of what the country was coming to, punctuated by knowing winks from Mat, Will, Jonas and Daniel. Amelia's brothers seemed to think it a very good joke that she should have repulsed Mr. Arkwright with such spirit, having not their father's provident care.

It was with trembling and lamentation that Mrs. Loftus wrote to her sister-in-law, but Miss Smythe towered over her and was eloquent on the dangers that threatened Amelia. In no other cause could Mrs. Loftus have acted with such desperate independence, but since the danger that threatened her daughter was to live as she herself had done, Mrs. Loftus was hardened even to resolving that she would speak to Squire, and urge the matter on.

Mrs. Catchlove responded as promptly as could be, assuring her sister of her hearty support, for there was nothing she liked better, she declared, than to get a pretty girl a husband. In this she was declaring no more than the truth, for so eager was she, that before even sending her letter she had begun to exaggerate Amelia's fortune to all her acquaintance. To Squire she wrote also, inviting her niece to join her in London well in advance to prepare for the season, intimating how many rich young men there were about in need of wives, and how many of these were titled gentlemen with estates in the finest hunting country in the kingdom. Nothing could be more good natured than her letter to Squire, or more cunning in concealing the piteous appeal which had prompted it.

The ladies waited to see what would be Squire's attitude upon receipt of this missive. Since the day of her refusal of Mr. Arkwright, Squire Loftus had seen fit to punish his daughter by the disapproval conveyed in his glowering look, and by the withdrawal of his conversational notice of her. As this was rather congenial than otherwise to Amelia, she had borne it with a calm unrepentance which every day was provoking him to more irritation. On the day when Mrs. Catchlove's letters came, however, some little pensiveness could be seen in the scowl with which Squire favoured the recalcitrant Amelia, and to the ladies this betokened such favourable possibilities that they could hardly keep back their agitation from being seen. Escaping after dinner to their own room, they began at once on the subject, but they were not destined to canvass it long. An unprecedented event occurred.

“Well, Miss Amelia,” said Squire, coming into the room, nearly sober. The ladies held their breath. “I have had a letter from my

sister Catchlove today. She invites you to London to visit her.”

“Indeed, father? I should like very well to go if you can spare me,” Amelia said.

“You think to catch a fine husband there, do you?”

“Well, if it should occur, you have already said you wished me wed, and I am anxious not to disappoint you.”

“Ha!” Squire said. “Think I'll let you marry some lisping fop, do you, or some upstart or some Whig? If you do go, I'll still be master, and I'll choose who's to be your husband. Still, you'd like some pleasuring in London, no doubt.”

“Yes, Father,” Amelia said meekly.

“Well, I'll let you go - if you'll go already promised to young Bob Arkwright.”

Amelia stiffened. She opened her mouth to damn London and all its pleasures, when another unprecedented event occurred.

“No, Squire,” Mrs. Loftus said. Miss Smythe, Amelia, and the Squire himself stood frozen in shocked disbelief.

“You cannot force her so,” Mrs. Loftus said. “Let Amelia go to London, and see how she fares. You can trust Mrs. Catchlove to see she keeps the line, after all. There is no reason she should marry Mr. Arkwright sooner than another.”

“Do you think to dictate to me?” Squire said. “I don't know what the country is coming to! This comes of teaching women to read, I suppose.”

“I tell you, Squire, Amelia shall go to London and she shall go without any promise to Mr. Arkwright. Otherwise, I tell you plainly I will be at you and make your life a misery. I will keep you up at night to rail at you, and water your wine, and feed barley

to your dogs if you are not compliant. There is nothing I will not do!”

The Squire gaped at his good lady. Mrs. Loftus, in the extremity of her emotion, had the desperate calmness of one devoted to destruction.

“Amelia shall go to London,” Mrs. Loftus repeated.

And then, before Amelia and Miss Smythe's startled gaze, Squire broke and crumbled and became a different man. He yet sputtered and snorted, but it was with only a shadow of his old authority.

“Very well, then. To London with you, Miss, but mind you get a husband there, or else you'll have Bob Arkwright when you come back.”

“Certainly, father,” Amelia said. “Except for Bob Arkwright, who I would not have if he were the last man on earth.”

Squire Loftus opened his mouth.

“No, Squire,” Mrs. Loftus said. “There shall be no conditions.”

Squire Loftus closed his mouth. He fled the scene of battle.

“Oh, mother!” Amelia cried. “You were splendid!”

## **Chapter 3**

It so happened that Parson Edgeworthy was intending to make the long journey to London within a fortnight of Mrs. Loftus' great victory. The worthy cleric, having laboured in utter obscurity for little more than more fortunate clergymen paid their curates to labour for them, had finally received his reward in this life as well as the next – an uncle had died, without entirely forgetting him,



and Parson Edgeworthy found himself at last elevated to a curate of his own, and required to travel south to take up his inheritance and console his aunt. Such an event could be only of the greatest satisfaction to all morally uplifted persons, and to the army of curates in particular, but with an eye to economy it was pleasing to Squire Loftus as well.

“Parson can escort Amelia,” he decreed.

“My dear, is it quite proper?” Mrs. Loftus asked. “He is only five-and-thirty, and a single gentleman. They will be on the road for near a week. How can they pass the nights?”

“In inns, Mrs. Loftus,” Squire said. “There's nought to fear. 'Tis only a parson, after all! If it were a proper gentleman you might squawk, but a parson has not spirit enough for any gallantries. Amelia will be quite safe, and they may share the expenses of the journey.”

“Amelia must have a maid to go with her,” Miss Smythe said. Squire glared at her. Unperturbed, Miss Smythe continued, “It would present a most uncreditable appearance were she to arrive in London with no lady's maid in attendance. If she is to go, let her go in a manner which will not reflect poorly upon you, Squire.”

“A maid? Where am I to be finding a fine lady's maid?” Squire said.

“You may send Martha, Squire,” Miss Smythe said. “She is the quickest to learn of any of the young women already in your pay, and the handiest with her needle. Why should she not have an opportunity of bettering herself?”

“And so you think I should be at the expense of sending the jade along, all so she can better herself!” Squire said. “I have something better to do with my money than see people bettering themselves, I can tell you.”

“Not at all,” Miss Smythe said. “You should send her along so that

Amelia may have a lady's maid on her journey as a young lady should. And as for the expense, it will certainly be offset by what you may save in their keep while they are in London, since Mrs. Catchlove has been so generous as to undertake that part of it." Since this was undeniable, Squire could think of no further objection, merely muttering,

"Lady's maids! I don't know what the country is coming to."

"I would rather have you, Miss Smythe," Amelia said.

"Damme if I'll let you go with That Woman to put ideas into your head!" said Squire. "It's bad enough, all this new linen and lady's maids and I don't know what else."

"I fear I would be of little use, dear Amelia," Miss Smythe said, as if there had been no such perditionous wish expressed. "What few introductions I might procure for you I'm sure will be nothing compared to what Mrs. Catchlove can provide."

"But would you not like to come, Miss Smythe?" Amelia said. Miss Smythe could not entirely suppress the emotion to which she was subject, but after a brief struggle said only,

"This journey is being projected not for my benefit, but for yours, dear Amelia. Let me be assured of your regular correspondence and I shall be satisfied."

"Satisfied! I should hope so," Squire said. "Laying out my money every week to receive letters, no doubt."

"Indeed, I shall write to you every day," Amelia said challengingly.

"Every day!" Squire rose to the challenge. "As if paper cost nothing!"

"I do not absolutely require your letters to be daily," Miss Smythe said. "I hope you will find your days so filled with amusements that twice a week will be an effort."

“You may be sure I shall not forget you, however full my days may be,” Amelia said.

“I don't know how we shall be finished all your linen in time,” Mrs. Loftus said.

With such delighted anticipations were the days filled, which intervened between Amelia and bliss. Martha, apprised of the honour for which she was destined, occasioned some resentment in the kitchen by her haughty airs, requiring a serious admonishment from Miss Smythe as to the advisability of retaining a modest demeanour. Young Will Croft, the stable boy, was thrown into gloom by the imminent departure of the winsome Martha, requiring fearsome swearing by Squire to abandon his listless apathy. Jonas, Matthew, Will and Daniel were so enlivened by their own wit on the subject of Amelia's likely suitors, as to provoke her into sharp retorts. And Mrs. Loftus was thrown into such a flutter by Amelia's imminent escape as to be incapable of sitting quietly at her work, with the end result that Amelia herself spent the last days at home in sewing from morning to night.

At last the great day arrived. Martha, Amelia, Miss Smythe and Mrs. Loftus were all up at dawn, unable to keep their beds on such a momentous occasion. It was a dull day, threatening rain, but no more brilliance was needed than the radiant glow emanating from the young maid and the young mistress. The carriage with Mr. Edgeworthy at last arrived, the trunks and bandboxes were fastened on, and the moment of parting got through.

“Oh, my dear Amelia,” was all Mrs. Loftus could say. Amelia herself felt a sudden pang and could say nothing at all. She embraced her mother fervently and Miss Smythe hardly less so.

“Godspeed, my dear,” Miss Smythe said huskily.

“Mind you don't fritter away your money,” Squire said.

Will Croft, hanging about in the background, said nothing at all.

But as the coach drew away, Martha waved to him, and rescued his faithful heart from utter desolation.

“Oh, Mr. Edgeworthy, I can hardly believe I am really going to London at last,” Amelia said.

“Where else would you be going?” Mr. Edgeworthy asked. He was too conscientious a clergyman to understand the difficulties of unbelief.

“Oh, Miss Amelia, do you think you'll see the King?” Martha said. In her own agitation Amelia could still be amused at this artless enquiry.

“I think my aunt Catchlove does not move in court circles,” she said. “Still, what fun! How astounded papa would be!”

“Your aunt may very well present you, Miss Amelia,” Mr. Edgeworthy said. “Though it is the Queen whose notice you may have the honour to receive, not the King's.”

“Oh, even just to see a lord!” Martha said.

“Persons of your station in life, Martha, would do better to have nothing to do with lords,” Mr. Edgeworthy said.

“Why not?” Martha said. “I'm sure I can curtsy ever so grandly now. Miss Smythe showed me how.”

“I wonder if my aunt has a very fine house,” Amelia said hastily, anxious to avoid any clarification from Mr. Edgeworthy of just what it was that was dangerous in lords to persons of Martha's station.

However little they could pierce the veil of the future, there was no leaving the topic. London and society and all the wonders they were to behold eclipsed the beauties and novelties of the country they passed through, and rendered even the discomforts of the inns where they lodged uninteresting.

They travelled in easy stages, for Mr. Edgeworthy was anxious to avoid even the slightest danger of being caught on the road after dark, where they would instantly be prey to highwaymen and cutthroats of the most merciless tendencies. Amelia and her maid were forced to possess their souls in patience through the long dull evenings. But they suffered neither breakdowns nor attacks and at length, on three o'clock in the afternoon of an unseasonably warm and clear day, caught their first sight of London.

“Ooh!” said Martha. “It's so big!”

“It looks very smoky,” Amelia said doubtfully. There could be no doubt but that she was correct. A dark pall lay over the town, almost obscuring the vista of buildings. But this first impression could not damp her spirits long. As they drew nearer she could make out the spires of innumerable churches in the vast jumble of buildings. Mr. Edgeworthy, having provided himself with a book of engravings of notable buildings, kindly pointed out St. Paul's.

Soon they were passing through the outlying villages, which to Amelia's eyes had all the appearance of great towns, and their way was impeded by flocks of geese and herds of cattle being driven to their doom to provision the great city.

Night was already falling by the time they reached London itself, but to Amelia's astonishment the streets through which they passed were lighted, and as busy as if it were midday. The carts and vans gave way to an equally dense throng of carriages and coaches, chairs and link-boys with their torches, and noisy crowds of people afoot, who filled the pavements and spilled out into the kennels. She saw gentlemen and ladies in velvets and silk and lace, but she saw many more people in plainer clothes, and more still in wretched rags or worn out finery.

“Where can they all be going?” Martha asked, bewildered by the noise and smell.

“How many ragged creatures there are!” said Amelia. “I did not

know such a great city would have so many poor people in it”

“The poor ye have always with you,” Mr. Edgeworthy explained.

They seemed to pass through an endless succession of streets before they finally drew up at Mrs. Catchlove's house. Tired and bewildered, but withal still excited, Amelia jumped down from the coach before the footman on watch for their arrival could offer any aid. He was left to hand Martha down in state.

Amelia ran up the steps and found her aunt at the door.

“Lord, how she's grown!” Mrs. Catchlove cried, and embraced Amelia heartily.

“Oh, aunt, I am so glad to be here!” Amelia said.

“Of course, my dear, and so am I to have you with me! I declare, it will be quite like having my dear Susan to marry off again!” Amelia blushed at this forthright acknowledgement, but fortunately in the flickering torchlight her blushes went unseen.

Mr. Edgeworthy now presented himself.

“This is Mr. Edgeworthy, who has been so kind as to escort me,” Amelia said.

“La! Fancy bringing your own beau along!” Mrs. Catchlove said in a rallying tone. Amelia did not quite comprehend what a “beau” might be, so she said only,

“And my maid, Martha.”

“Well, come in, come in, all of you. I declare, you must be quite perishing with such a long journey. I have got a supper ready for you.” With this welcome intelligence Mrs. Catchlove swept them all into the house and forthwith into the dining room, which was brilliantly lit by two great candelabras.

“La, my dear, what funny clothes you have got!” Mrs. Catchlove said, with a sudden look of alarm. Amelia looked down at her own dress in some bewilderment, for she had put on her second finest attire for this climactic day.

“What's wrong with them, aunt?”

“Oh, my dear, so very out of fashion. 'Pon my faith, an oval hoop! And your skirt no lower than your ankles! And an apron! La, I haven't seen the like in thirty years. How very barbaric you must be at Loftus Manor.”

“But my mother wears the same,” Amelia said.

“Oh, my dear, I am sure she does. Lord, how funny!”

Amelia felt she might have retorted the same, for in the brightly lit room she could see her aunt's tenue quite clearly and it looked full as strange to her as her own did to her city relation. Mrs. Catchlove wore a round hooped petticoat with abundance of lace trimming, a mass of lace gauze about her neck and a dress with row upon row of ribboned flounces, caught up at the front to display the petticoat beneath. Her hair was dressed in a startling construction heaped twelve inches high upon her head, with all sorts of objects in it, representing birds and flowers and fruit, the whole generously powdered. Amelia wondered her aunt's head should be fertile enough to grow such a mass of hair, or solid enough to bear its weight. But the strangest thing was Mrs. Catchlove's face and neck, which were thickly covered with white paint overlaid with fiery red on her cheeks and lips, and decorated with patches in the shape of crescent moons and stars.

“What a good thing it is I have made no engagements for you yet,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “I can certainly never permit you to walk abroad in such clothes, and without your hair dressed or a bit of powder to it. Well, well, tomorrow we shall set to work to make you fashionable. For now, sit down, my dear and eat. Mr. Edgeworthy, pray join us. I declare, I never saw such a thing! You poor dear! But never mind, I shall soon have you fit to be seen.”

With such species of assurances did Mrs. Catchlove pass the supper hour. The travellers were quite glad to sit down and eat, for they had not stopped for any refreshment since setting out that morning. Amelia was so hungry she could hardly admire the French dishes with which she was regaled, but she ate heartily of them.

The repast done, Mr. Edgeworthy began to take his leave, but Mrs. Catchlove would not hear of it.

“Lord, it's only to make up another bed, and that will be done in a twinkling. Sure, you will not be journeying any further tonight!”

Mr. Edgeworthy gave way. Amelia's doubts of her aunt's good nature, brought on by criticism of her mode of dress, were soothed by this hearty hospitality.

Amelia was very glad to seek her bed as soon as supper was done. She was too tired to take more than cursory notice of the opulence of her chamber, and sank wearily down onto the soft mattress. But not immediately did she sleep, for a great tumult seemed to be going on out in the street, and penetrated clearly into the room. It was as if all of London were still out of doors, and parading beneath her window on purpose to make a great noise.

Even after she had finally fallen asleep, she was jerked awake at intervals by some drunken hallooing, or the watch calling the hours. Not until dawn did the noise entirely subside, and then only briefly, for soon the sounds of servants undoing shutters and clattering milk pails, of pedlars calling their wares and delivery vans and market waggons lumbering along two streets off replaced the sounds of revelry, and rendered sleep fitful. Amelia was forced to conclude that her ears were as countrified as her mode of dress, and could only hope that her hearing could be brought into a fashionable insensibility as easily as her attire.



## Chapter 4

The Earl of Creasy was bored. He had great estates and two castles, and an opulent house in town, and yet he was bored. He had some of the finest horseflesh in the country in his stables, and a mettlesome breed in his kennels, and had come near to joining those of his forefathers who had made the supreme sacrifice in pursuit of the red brushed fox, and yet he was bored. He had gambled away enough money to ruin twenty lesser men, and conversed with all the wits of the day, and undone as many great ladies and humble maids as any one man well could, and still he was bored. He had collected such paintings and such statues about him, and had such furniture and such landscapes made for him as to be the most shining light in the Dilettante Club, and he looked upon all these things without pleasure. He was nine-and-twenty years old, one of the wealthiest men in the kingdom, the confidant of princes, the arbiter of taste, and all this was without savour to him.

The Earl of Creasy groaned. Henry Newcombe looked up but said nothing.

“What I would not give to trade places with you, Henry,” the earl said.

“I regret I cannot oblige you, my lord,” Mr. Newcombe said. “But lands, money and title are all entailed, and your winsome looks also, so without you die and leave a son, there is no escaping them.”

The earl laughed.

“You're a fine fellow, Newcombe,” he said. “You're a better man than I, at bottom – why should not you have the lands, money, titles and face, and I be the humble secretary?”

“I think I am not, at bottom,” Mr. Newcombe said. “And I think as

a secretary I am wanting in humility.”

The earl laughed again, but it had a hollow sound. Newcombe watched the earl covertly as he flung himself into a chair. He had been wont to deprecate his employer's wild drinking, gaming, riding and whoring, but this new mood of austere dejection troubled him yet more.

Mr. Newcombe was some fifteen years older than the earl, and there were others besides himself who thought him wanting in humility. He had been destined for the church, and offered a handsome living by a noble patron, had been on the eve of ordination when he had offended his patron by something too little of servility, and his archbishop by something too little of conformity, and had found himself naked in the world. A reasonable man would have been crushed by such a blow, but Mr. Newcombe had proceeded to make his living as a tutor as cheerfully as if he were secure of his future, had chanced to gain the admiration of his most illustrious pupil, made the Grand Tour with him, and finally settled into the comfortable life of his lordship's secretary. When his lordship, on his return from Italy and his coming of age, had proceeded to go to the devil, Mr. Newcombe had not scrupled to disapprove. Much to the surprise of all who knew him, the earl did not dismiss his impudent tutor-cum-secretary, but remained on such terms of equality with him as rather alarmed his more aristocratic connections.

But his aristocratic connections had seen little of the earl this fortnight past. The earl had lounged aimlessly in his London house, hardly speaking and refusing all visitors, had moved restlessly to one of his houses in Kent, flitted as inconsiderately back, and roused to fleeting animation only under the blank-faced ironies of his secretary. Such was his despondency that even the lower servants were affected, and crept about as if there were illness in the house.

“Come, Newcombe,” the earl said. “Let's be off to Cheswick.”

Mr. Newcombe looked at him consideringly.

“There's not like to be much doing at Cheswick this time of year, my lord.”

“Never mind. We can at least be dull amid fresh air and greenery.”

It was late in the day to begin a journey of seventy miles, although the roads were much improved of late. But the earl was obstinate, even in aimless gloom, and within the hour they were rattling north in a travelling coach, with a full retinue of postilions.

“Why do you bear with me?” the earl asked. “I do you no credit, I know.”

“It is a comfortable life I lead, my lord, and I'd be loathe to cast my bread upon the waters at my age.”

“I don't believe you, Henry. You've thrown up comfort and preferment before, for a mere whim.”

“For a principle, my lord.”

The earl shrugged.

“Is it no matter of principle whether you serve such a disreputable rake as I?”

“I think you have still some redeeming virtues, my lord.”

“And why have you begun 'my lording' me at every turn?” the earl said.

“I have always done so, my lord. Has it never before come to your notice?”

The earl smiled bleakly.

“I suppose I thought it my due,” he said.

“It is no less so now,” Mr. Newcombe said. The earl shrugged again and turned to gaze out the window. Dusk was falling, and behind them London was turning from an indistinct jumble of buildings to a soft glow. He had hitherto been particularly enlivened by this vista.

Mr. Newcombe forbore to break in upon the earl's silence, but watched him anxiously. He thought this melancholy dangerous, for his lordship was like to break out of it into some fresh extravagance surpassing any previous follies, and Mr. Newcombe felt still some of the guardian's carefulness towards his erstwhile pupil. Had his concern been less tender, Mr. Newcombe might indeed have worried over how discreditable to the teacher was the waywardness of his pupil, but he had no thought to spare for the enjoyment of his own discomfiture.

“He should marry,” Newcombe thought suddenly, and was glad of the darkness which hid his blushes. Knowing the indifference with which his lordship had looked upon the most charming single ladies from the best families, only the most unrealistic of optimists could hold out any hope of a cure from such a treatment. The earl had found married women, maid servants and demi-reps interesting enough until lately, but never in his moments of greatest hilarity had he been much impressed even by the most widely acknowledged beauties amongst the debutantes who so lavished their smiles upon him. Mr. Newcombe suppressed a sigh.

With a sudden jolt they were thrown to the floor of the carriage. The postilions shouted.

The earl picked himself up and shook himself.

“What is it?” he said.

“The axle's broke, my lord,” one of the riders said. The earl climbed out. The flickering light of the carriage lamp showed such a gaping pot hole in the middle of the road that the mishap was not surprising.

“Are you hurt?” the earl asked his secretary.

“No, my lord, only taken by surprise.” Newcombe climbed down likewise. They surveyed the damage in silence. The earl looked up and down the road.

“There's nought we can do about it without a new axle, my lord,” the senior postilion said.

“I know,” said the earl. “We must seek some aid at the nearest inn, I suppose.”

“Happen there's one within a mile further on, my lord. I can ride there and be back with a post chaise in a twinkling.”

“No,” said the earl. “Give me your horse – I'll go.”

“But, my lord—”

“No,” said the earl. “I cannot be idling about now. Newcombe, you are no horseman, I know. Will you be alright until I return?”

“Of course, my lord.”

The earl swung himself into the saddle. Two of the outriders remounted likewise.

“What are you doing?” the earl said.

“We must go with you, my lord,” one of them said.

“Not at all,” said the earl. “Do you think I would suffer Mr. Newcombe to wait on such a road as this in such darkness, with only two men to guard him? Let the lot of you remain. I shall do as well by myself as trotting along in state.”

“But, my lord—”

“No,” said the earl. His servants of all degrees knew that voice.

They watched him trot briskly away, and be swallowed up in the darkness. The men looked at each other but did not speak.

The earl felt his depression lighten. The road was a proven menace, and the horse was unknown to him, but he could not resist urging the beast to a canter. The strongest whim overcame him, that he might simply ride on and on until he came to the northernmost tip of Scotland, and then take ship to Norway and ride again, until he came to where the ice reigned. But Henry Newcombe awaited him beside the lamed carriage, and it seemed to him also that Henry would wait unmoving until he returned, growing thinner and perishing by the roadside if he did not return in good time.

The earl uttered an oath that was very like a growl, and rode on. He was about midway between the scene of the accident and the putative inn, when he became aware of another horseman, rising suddenly from the ditch to confront him with a pistol in either hand.

“Stand and deliver,” the highwayman said. The earl was amused to hear his voice, not gruff or menacing, but melodious and somewhat high pitched.

“I will not,” he said stoutly.

## **Chapter 5**

“Are ye blind, man? I have two pistols fully charged,” the highwayman said.

“I see them quite clearly,” said the earl. “But I will not be giving up my purse for fear of such a trifle as a brace of pistols, be they never so heavily loaded. Besides, I am sure I have not so much as a guinea in it. I have left my cash box in my coach, and that is guarded by four armed men.”

“If you want to die for your guinea, so be it,” said the highwayman.

“And if you discharge one of those pistols, my postilions will be upon you before you can have the cash in your hand. If you would be hanged for it, fire away.”

The highwayman raised one pistol in the air and fired. Almost at the sound of the shot, the cries of the earl's men could be heard.

“Hare-n-hounds, now you've done it!” the earl said. “They'll be down on you in three minutes.”

“Lumme!” said the highwayman. “There really are four men down the road. And armed too, I warrant, just as you said.” He turned his horse's head back towards the side of the road.

“Did you think I was bluffing? With two loaded pistols pointed at me? Let's be off!” The earl turned likewise and brought his mount close by the other's.

“You'll not be holding me here!” said the highwayman.

“I don't mean to!” the earl rejoined. “I'm coming with you.”

“I don't fancy your company, gov.”

“Do you want to stay and be taken? You have no choice.”

The highwayman shrugged and wasted no further time. He urged his horse down into the ditch and up the other side, skirted the corner of a ploughed field and reached unbroken land beyond, with the earl close behind him. The two men put spurs to their horses. For several miles they pushed on at all due speed, the highwayman taking paths and clearing hedges well known to him, and the earl following without hesitation. Finally they pulled up and listened. No sounds of pursuit reached them.

“I'll be bidding you farewell, now, sir,” said the highwayman. “But first, I'd be obliged if you'd empty your pockets.” He pointed his loaded pistol at the earl.

His lordship burst out laughing.

“You're welcome to all that I possess,” he said. “But I'd be much obliged if you'd humour my whim and let me come with you. I'll not betray you, I give you my word – but I'm devilishly at a loss for something to occupy my time, and I've never kept company with a gentleman of the road before.”

“Are you just escaped from your keepers, sir?” asked the highwayman.

“It does seem mad, doesn't it?” the earl said.

“Sure, and I must be as mad as you, for I'm bound to say I like the look of you. Come along then.”

“Might I make so bold as to ask your name?” said the earl as they urged their horses to a walk.

“You might make so bold as to ask, but I might not be so bold as to answer. 'Dick Gamble' is the name I'm known by. And what might your honour's moniker be?”

“John Warwick,” said the earl, which as far as it went was well and truly his name. “It seems to me you're no common highwayman. You're too well spoken. Are you by any chance a gentleman?”

Dick Gamble gave a bitter laugh.

“Oh, I can talk thieves' cant well enough,” he said. “But I find my best customers do not understand it, so I give them the benefit of my schooling.”

“You are a gentleman, then.”



“No, Mr. Warwick, far from it. A farmer is what I was, until my Lord Dunsdale was pleased to turn me out and put sheep in my stead. An honest, church-going married man is what I was, until I was reduced to being hanged for stealing bread or else being hanged for something more.”

“Let us hope you may make your fortune and retire in all honour without being hanged at all.”

“I dare not hope it. I'm quite ready to be hanged in the end, if only I can get my boys into some honest profession first.”

They came to what appeared to be an abandoned farmstead. In the fickle moonlight, it was an ill-favoured place, seemingly in ruins, and no glimmer of light showed. Dick Gamble, however, led the way through an arched gate into a tumbled-down stable, presided over by a most villainous looking ostler. The earl wondered if he was about to be parted from his horse beyond his intention, but the highwayman turned over his mount without hesitation, and the earl reminded himself that he must adjust his behaviour to the etiquette of his new company, and did likewise.

The highwayman then strode up to the back door of the house and knocked out a complicated signal with the butt of his pistol. In a few minutes the door was opened to them. Gamble stepped in and motioned the earl to follow.

Their host was a surprisingly sedate looking man, as far as the earl could judge by the wavering light of a tallow candle.

“It's all right, Simon, he's a friend,” said Gamble. He led the way down a narrow corridor, empty but for the dust of ages, and through a rickety door.

The earl blinked in surprise. He found himself in a snug room, neither overly clean nor well-furnished, but with a sumptuous fire burning in the grate. There were tables and chairs scattered in little groups beneath the oak-beamed ceiling. At one end of the room was a bar, with a beer cask upon it, and bottles of spirits on shelves

behind it, and mugs hanging from hooks above it, the whole presided over by a woman in apron and mob cap. She was middle aged and her face showed the lines of care, but she was still comely withal.

There were some dozen other guests, male and female, and of all ages and conditions, from a handsome lass of sixteen in elaborate brocades, to an ancient and scrofulous beggar hardly covered by his rags.

The buzz of conviviality ceased abruptly. The earl was known in his own circle for his sang-froid, but he was at some pains to disguise his uneasiness before the sudden cold scrutiny to which he was subjected.

“And who might this be?” said one rogue. He was neither the poorest nor the best attired, but the earl had no doubt that this was the person of most authority in the room.

“’Tis a friend, Mr. Thurl,” said Gamble. “John Warwick by name, and a gentleman born.”

“We are seldom honoured by gentlemen,” said Thurl. “What bail can you give for our safety with a born gentleman about?”

“I give you my word,” said the earl. “I will tell no one of this snuggery.”

“He gives his *word*,” said Thurl, with cold disdain. There was a tense silence.

“And if you're not a fool, you'll take it,” the woman behind the bar said suddenly. Thurl turned in his chair to scowl at her, but she met his gaze unflinchingly. After a charged interval Thurl slouched back into his chair, shrugging.

The old beggar said nervously,

“Have you set eyes on Sedge the Blade today, Fanny my dear?”

The young girl laughed unnaturally and began chattering about Sedge's latest intrigue.

Gamble and the earl crossed to the bar.

“Madam, I thank you,” the earl said, speaking low.

“Sure, I haven't kept this den for twenty years without being able to tell who's safe and who's not,” she said.

“If I'd known Black Billy was to be here, I'd not have brought you,” said Gamble. “He's no man to cross, as many poor lads could tell you.”

“If dead men could speak,” said the woman.

“A drink for my friend,” said the earl. He pulled out his purse and laid a shilling on the bar. Gamble eyed the bulging bag.

“So it was bluff after all,” he said. The earl smiled at him.

## **Chapter 6**

The earl awoke towards dusk. For a moment he forgot where he was and gazed with bewilderment at the slanted beams of the roof, the bleared window and the narrow cot whereon he was lying. Then his last night's adventures came back to him.

“Faith! I must be mad,” he mumbled. He sat up, stretched and put on his waistcoat and jacket. In sudden alarm, he felt for his purse and watch, but both appeared untouched. He got up and wandered down the narrow rickety stairs to the bar.

“Good morrow to you, Mr. Warwick,” said a cheerful voice. The woman who kept the bar was clearing the tables after the previous evening's debauch.

“Good morrow, mistress. I'm sorry, I don't know your name.”

She laughed.

“It's Meg, Meg Rack. We don't often have guests such as you here, sir.”

“And what kind of guest am I?”

“Why, a proper gentleman with no reason to shun the Runners, I'll be bound.”

“Well, Mistress Meg, I hope you can overlook it,” he said.

“Though I verily believe I must have compounded a felony last night. I should have seized my highwayman and handed him over to a magistrate, not shied off with him.”

“Dick Gamble's a good sort,” Meg said. “I'm glad he was not taken. Sure, there's many a lad I've served in this bar who's ended on the nubbing cheat, but I'd be loathe to see poor Dick go that way. He has a wife and two sons and fair dotes upon them. Except for the High Toby, he's a proper fine fellow.”

“Where is the estimable Dick?” the earl asked.

“Gone to his Molly, I'll wager. He'll be here again this night,” said Meg. She turned to the bar with a tray of mugs. The earl lifted the partition for her. “Thank ye kindly, sir. You'll be wanting a fine breakfast, I doubt not, but we've never done aught in the way of that here, excepting my Simon's dinner and my own. It's not meat our customers come for.”

“I don't mind,” the earl said. “If I might be permitted to share your dinner I'll see you don't lose by it.”

Meg laughed again.

“We'll be eating it in half an hour. Being as you're a fine gentleman, you'll be wanting to wash your hands, I suppose. There's a pump in the yard.” The earl followed her gesture and

went into the yard. In the declining daylight, he could see that the mean-looking stable contained a more solidly built inner portion. His horse was placidly munching sweet and unmouldy hay. The earl wandered out of the yard through a rickety gate and found himself once again in front of the inn. It was as dilapidated as he had supposed on the previous evening. He went back through the yard and in the back door.

“Why do you put up with such a ruinous appearance?” he asked. “Looking at this place from the outside, one would swear it was abandoned.”

“And do you think we'd give up such a fine deception? It's twenty years Simon and I have run this snugger and never a bit of trouble, barring the odd knife-fight. We'll do naught to catch the attention of the lawful folk.”

“Why do you not change businesses, Mistress Meg, and keep a respectable inn?” She bridled.

“This is a respectable inn,” she said. “You'll never have your pocket picked here, nor be accosted by morts, nor see any cheating at cards. Nor you won't find as many bed bugs here as at your fine coaching inns, I warrant.”

“I beg your pardon, madam,” the earl said. “I hope you will overlook the ignorance of a novice.” Meg relaxed and flashed another of her ready smiles.

“Poor folk must live after all,” she said. “And poor folk like their jaunt into the country as well as the finest lords and ladies. If you'll come through here, sir, we'll sit down to dinner together.” She indicated the appropriate door, but the earl bowed her through it before him. “La!” said Meg, impressed by his manner.

He found himself in Meg and Simon Rack's private apartment. There was but one room, bedchamber, kitchen, dining room and sitting room combined, but looking at it from a new perspective the earl judged it was a snug and comfortable place. Like the bar and

his bed-chamber, it looked into the yard, so that no gleam of light would give the lie to the ruined exterior.

Simon Rack was within. He looked up at the earl as he entered, but said nothing.

“I hope I do not intrude,” the earl said.

“Nay. If Meg's taken a fancy to you, you're alright,” Mr. Rack said briefly.

They sat down to dinner. The earl was amused at the solemnity with which Mr. Rack pronounced a blessing upon Meg's soup and meat pie, but a deeply ingrained courtesy kept any trace of levity from appearing in his demeanour.

An hour later, when it was fully dark, the first customer arrived. He was a short, thin man of around forty, with an air of such furtiveness as could not fail to draw attention. He slipped up to the bar, eyeing the earl, who was seated by the fire.

“Good morrow, Sulky,” Meg said. She was in her position behind the bar.

“Good morrow, Meg. Give us a tot for old Randy's sake. It's five years today since he was turned off.”

“Five years, is it? A good long time,” Meg said heartily, as she poured his glass of spirits. Sulky turned and crossed the room to sit opposite the earl.

“Five years,” Sulky repeated. “A great crowd came to Tyburn to see it. There was so many gentlefolk around, it was a great shame old Randy wasn't out in the crowd to lighten their pockets for them. I got three gold watches myself and two of them worked. But of course Randy couldn't be out in the crowd, being he was guest of honour. He made a fine speech, too, what Parson learned him, all about repenting of his sins afore they turned him off. I was right proud my brother could make such a fine speech.”

All this was said in a plaintive whine. Sulky never looked directly at the earl, but there was no mistaking that his remarks called for some comment.

“I'm glad your brother made a creditable appearance,” the earl said, somewhat at a loss to know what was appropriate. Such extensively illustrious ancestors as were his could never have avoided the occasional head being lopped off, but he had never yet conversed with the brother of a man who had been hanged for picking pockets.

“Ah?” Sulky said. “Yes, thank you kindly, sir. I'm sure it's good of you to say so. Maybe you was there?”

“No, I – uh – I do not often go to Tyburn.”

“No? Well, maybe you'll come and see me when I'm turned off. I'll get Parson to learn me a fine speech too.”

“Perhaps you won't come to be hanged,” the earl said.

“Not come to be hanged? Oh, aye, I'll come to the nubbing cheat right enough. I had five brothers and they was all hanged, except for one was transported and one died in the Thames hulks, a year ago come Michaelmas. It's this American war, they say, as stopped them transporting poor lads to America, so they send 'em to rot on the Thames instead. Otherwise young Andrew would have been transported and could have died in comfort in America.”

Sulky nodded sagely to himself. The earl looked across at Meg, who silently held a finger up to her head, in token of Sulky's confused mental state.

“May I stand you to another drink, Sulky?” the earl said. Sulky seemed to perk up slightly, although his lugubrious mood in no way disappeared.

“Oh? Aye, thank ye kindly, sir. Another drink would be fitting to

poor Randy's memory.”

The earl went to the bar. Meg poured out another drink for each of them.

“It's right kind of you to listen to Sulky, sir,” she said in a low voice. “Most everyone else is tired of hearing about it – folk don't like to be reminded where they're heading.”

The earl carried Sulky's drink to him and raised his own glass.

“To Randy,” he said.

“Oh? Aye, to Randy.” Sulky drained his tot and sat staring into the fire.

The earl was relieved to hear the signal rapped at the door and to see Simon move to answer it. He hoped for more cheerful company.

Nor was his hope misplaced. The innkeeper returned with a young man and woman who came in laughing. They stopped for a moment to eye the earl, but went to the bar with hardly a break in their merriment.

“Hello, Meg, me love. Let's have some ale.”

“Ale, is it?” Meg said. “I thought you were one for spirits, Sedge.”

“Tis Sally wants ale,” Sedge replied. “And there's no end to what I'd do for Sally.” Sally greeted this tribute with a giggle. In some amazement the earl realized that the ragged girl could not be more than twelve years old, with a still childish shape, but he perceived that Sedge was a diminutive fellow who presumably preferred his companions not to tower over him.

Two ladies of the street came in next, in all the ragged finery and paint of their profession. They sat down together complaining of the soreness of their feet.



The next to arrive was a more creditable looking rascal, if tidiness of apparel and a look of good humour could make a rascal creditable as well as an honest man. He looked over those assembled and apparently singled out the earl as a conversable companion.

“Fine weather tonight,” he began.

“Fine indeed,” the earl agreed. “Perfect day for pheasants tomorrow, I’ll wager.”

The man laughed.

“Poaching’s not my lay,” he said.

“I never thought it was, sir,” said the earl. “You have a town air about you.”

“Do I indeed? Well, that’s something. Do you think there’ll be peace with America?”

“I hope so,” the earl said, amused to find political interests in the criminal classes.

The man shook his head.

“You know what peace means, don’t you? Thousands of soldiers and sailors turned loose upon the shore. And you know what that means? More prigs and vagabonds. More competition. And that makes the judges harsher. Besides, without America there’ll be no more transportation. There’s many a lad has come back from being transported and lived twenty more years before he was nubbed at the last. Now they’ll be nubbed from the first. Well, perhaps they’ll find some other far off place to send ‘em to – and I will say there’s been many transported as would rather go to Tyburn and be done with it.”

Sudden silence fell. The earl looked up and saw Black Billy Thurl

with his retinue enter the room. He could think of no other word than retinue, for he had seen already that Black Billy was a power amidst his new company.

“There's a fine horse in the stable,” the political analyst said.

“It's mine,” said the earl.

“Aye, I thought as much. If I'd seen her anywhere else, I'd be tempted to be off with her, but – the snuggery is like sanctuary.”

Dick Gamble came in. Seeing the earl, he made his way over and flung himself down.

“Lord, what a night!” he said. “The trouble with the High Toby is there's too many coves on that lay. The gentry won't stir without servants and blunderbusses. Twice tonight I've had to run for it, and only one little ruby pin for my pains. Here, Ted! What is it worth to you?”

The earl's interlocutor took up the bauble and examined it.

“Sixpence,” he said.

“Sixpence! You damned scoundrel!” Dick said.

“Sixpence is charity. That's no ruby. That's coloured glass.” Dick groaned.

“I'm not cut out for this business,” he complained. “Another year and I'll retire. I should have enough to 'prentice out my boys by then, and why should I care whether I eat after that. Oh, well, Meg, a round for the gentlemen!”

Thus began the most curious week in the earl's life. He had been on drunken sprees in low haunts many times, but never before for any length of time, or with much attention to his company except to assess the girls for their willingness and their cleanliness. He lingered at the inn, to the surprise of his hosts and himself, but they

asked no questions. He met whores, pickpockets, burglars, fences, footpads, card sharks, horse thieves, beggars and vagabonds. They were merry enough in their sanctuary, and often quite willing to confide their histories. Two things struck the earl – how few had been their opportunities of honest employment and how certainly they looked forward to the gallows. It was an enlivening and yet a bleak experience, but curiously his depression quite forsook him. He acknowledged to himself that in his proper station he had little enough to complain about.

## Chapter 7

By the end of a week, Mrs. Catchlove was well content with her niece's company. Miss Amelia was now arrayed in the utmost pitch of fashion, with ribbands to match every fardingale, which she had been schooled to call petticoats, and her hair elaborately dressed, although with a profusion of ringlets down the side rather than entirely heaped up on top of her head – the end result of much earnest debate, with the hairdresser and Amelia on one side, armed with engravings of Lady Melbourne and the Duchess of Devonshire in the new more natural style, in the end prevailing against Mrs. Catchlove's attachment to ornament and powder.

“Now I may take you out and introduce you properly,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “How pretty you are, my dear! If only you would wear rouge to your cheeks I should have nought to complain about.”

But Miss Amelia only laughed at this gentle hint, for she deemed her own face sufficiently pink that she had resisted any initiation into the art of painting, and she could still hardly suppress her hilarity at the sight of aunt's unnatural red mask, and thought patches, even diamond-, moon- or heart-shaped, absurd, let alone in the form of coach and horses.

“Well, aunt, I am quite ready,” she said simply and the ladies

departed Mrs. Catchlove's house to call upon Lady Farrington.

Mrs. Catchlove was the widow of a man who had been, not to put too fine a point on it, a merchant. However much the worthy couple might have been beneath the notice of the *ton*, for not so much as an acre of land did they own, they had had the fortune to produce one excessively pretty daughter. This daughter they had brought up carefully schooled to ambition and fashion and she had crowned their efforts by marrying an impoverished baronet. When Miss Catchlove became Lady Wickham, all their circle exclaimed at their good fortune, except certain ill-natured old ladies, who prophesied that the elevated daughter could be depended upon to cut her parents. But the ill-natured were confounded. Lady Wickham remained dutifully attached to her low relations, and dragged them up with her. Mrs. Catchlove was not slow to take advantage of the precarious hold she had established upon this narrow outcropping of gentility. By arduous study of polite manners as seen on the stage, and an attention to fashion bordering on the fanatic, Mrs. Catchlove had built an outpost for herself within sight of the green pastures of the gentry, cultivating those members of it who were debarred from withdrawing to the inner sanctum by poverty or a complete lack of parts. That her manner and appearance were rather theatrical, and drew the sneers of the satirical, and that her husband's last years were rendered miserable by the company of the penniless and stupid fringes of a parasitic class in lieu of that of men of substance and parts within his own, troubled Mrs. Catchlove not at all.

Lady Farrington was her greatest conquest and Mrs. Catchlove was deeply attached to her. Although the widow of only an obscure knight, Lady Farrington had married a daughter to Mr. Rotherham, who had done something for the government and had access to much higher circles. Mrs. Catchlove had not yet succeeded in penetrating to these higher circles, but she remained faithful to Lady Farrington and Mrs. Rotherham.

“Now, remember, my dear, you must not be shy, but must talk and laugh as much as you can, for it would be positively fatal to appear ill at ease in company. Everyone knows you have been buried in

the country, and will be on the watch for any awkwardness in you.”

“Yes, aunt,” Amelia said, considerably abashed by these instructions.

“And pray do not be rattling on about how noisy and dirty London is, as you have done with me, my love, for that would positively brand you as one who is unused to a fashionable life. At your age a young lady should be less easy to impress. How much better it would have been had my brother sent you to me four years ago! I am sure you would not then have wasted half your youth.”

“No, aunt” said Amelia, now utterly purged of any delight in anticipation of her first morning call.

“I am glad at least that Miss Smythe has taught you to speak properly, for nothing could be more mortifying than to betray a provincial accent. So do be on your guard, I pray you, not to let fall any of your north country expressions.”

Mrs. Catchlove's tender admonitions were at this point brought to an end, for her dear friend Lady Farrington lived only in the next street. Amelia was surprised that it had been necessary to have recourse to the escort of a footman to step so short a distance, but one of her aunt's most stringent commands had been that she was never to stir out of the house without proper male protection.

Despite the intimidating hints to which she had been subjected, Amelia could not but feel a beating of the heart as she followed her aunt into Lady Farrington's salon. Now at last, she was to enter into that dread and coveted world where ladies and gentlemen vied in wittiness.

The room seemed already very full of people. Mrs. Catchlove and Lady Farrington embraced with as enthusiastic a display of devotion as was compatible with the preservation of their silks. As she was introduced and made her curtsy, Amelia was astonished to see that Lady Farrington was not a great beauty, and was painted even more fantastically than Mrs. Catchlove.

“But how charming!” Lady Farrington said, making Amelia blush. “You never told me, my dear Mrs. Catchlove, what a little piece of perfection your niece was. Such a healthy complexion! I declare she will have all the wits writing pastorals about her beauty.”

“I could not have told you, my lady, as I never set eyes on her these last seven years. You know she has passed all her life in the country,” Mrs. Catchlove said. Since she had just been warning Amelia not to betray herself, this did not seem quite good natured, but Amelia had no time to ponder upon it, for she must be introduced all around. She curtsied to Mrs. Seale, a formidable old woman who barely noticed her, Mrs. Danville, a faded woman of forty with a forced air of girlishness, and Mrs. Rotherham, Lady Farrington's daughter. Last came Sir Lancelot Scoby, who pranced up to Amelia and ogled her openly. Amelia was quite astonished, for Sir Lancelot was attired in such embroidery and lace, of such gold and scarlet, as put her own finery to shame. He spoke withal in a high, lisping voice which she thought could hardly be natural to him.

“Pon my soul, you're a devilish pretty gal, Miss Loftus,” Sir Lancelot said. “All the young ladies will be in despair, I declare. I'm overcome, quite overcome.” And to her amazement, he actually raised a handkerchief to dab at the corner of each eye.

“I'm sure you exaggerate, Sir Lancelot,” she said incredulously. Immediately she felt she had done wrong, for she perceived her aunt looking at her meaningfully. Amelia had no notion of what was required of her, and smiled foolishly.

“We were speaking of the Marchioness of Teasdale when you came in,” Lady Farrington said, setting the conversation back on its destined path. Amelia, however, was not to discover what was newsworthy of the marchioness, for Sir Lancelot remained before her.

“Egad, Miss Loftus, I shall have something to tell at my club tonight. I exaggerate, forsooth! As witty as she is charming.”

Amelia was too confused to make any reply.

“Oh, you are too wicked,” she heard Mrs. Rotherham cry, in response to what Mrs. Danville had said of Lady Teasdale. There was a general burst of ladylike laughter behind her.

“I protest, 'tis true,” Mrs. Danville said vivaciously. The ladies laughed again.

“Have you lived always in London?” Amelia asked Sir Lancelot.

“Always lived in London? Always! 'Tis monstrous dull anywhere else,” Sir Lancelot said. Encouraged by this, Amelia said,

“And are you acquainted with all the wits?”

“Wits? Indeed I am. There's George Winston, a great friend of mine and a dashed clever fellow. And Jack Norris – none can put down a London porter as he can!” Miss Amelia had hoped to hear something of Goldsmith or Miss Burney or even Dictionary Johnson, but she perceived that Sir Lancelot moved in somewhat different circles. It dawned upon her, as she listened to his lisping declarations and stared in fascination at the clouds of lace at his wrists and throat, and the gilt clocks upon his stockings, that Sir Lancelot was what her father termed a fop. For the first time in her life she comprehended some of her parent's indignation in denouncing the fashionable world.

On the other side of the room, the details of Lady Teasdale's quarrel with Lady Harcourt were still under discussion, with much tittering and many expressions of delighted disapproval. It seemed that there was to be no discourse on literature or painting in Lady Farrington's salon today.

Then Mrs. Catchlove was rising and in a great bustle about leaving. Amelia was surprised that their visit should be so short, but followed her aunt in silent docility, pausing only as long as was necessary to disengage her hand from Sir Lancelot's grasp.

“Well, my dear, I did tremble to see how you began, but 'tis clear Sir Lancelot was greatly taken with you,” Mrs. Catchlove said.

“Aunt, what did I do wrong? I could perceive you were not pleased, but I assure you I cannot think why.”

“What? So solemnly and unsmilingly as you answered Sir Lancelot, quite as if you would reprove him! 'I'm sure you exaggerate, Sir Lancelot!’” Mrs. Catchlove repeated Amelia's exact words, but her imitation, it must be confessed, was not to the life, for she portrayed Amelia's simple disclaimer as an act of cold hauteur.

“But what should I have said, aunt?” Amelia asked, rather amused than abashed.

“Why, *what* you said was well enough. 'Tis the manner of it I must decry. You should smile and make up to him, so—” Here Mrs. Catchlove put on a demure simper and cried out most flirtatiously, “I'm sure you exaggerate, Sir Lancelot!” With her fan, she wrapped playfully at an imaginary gentleman's arm, bestowing at the same time on this phantom a look of coy modesty.

Amelia laughed, for it seemed an absurd display.

“But why should I do so, aunt?” she asked.

“Why, then he must answer, 'Not at all, Miss Loftus, I protest. 'Pon my faith I protest.’” This last Mrs. Catchlove uttered exactly in Sir Lancelot's style, making ostentatious play with an imaginary handkerchief. Amelia laughed so heartily that two gentlemen turned to stare at her. Mrs. Catchlove eyed them speculatively, but Amelia was all unaware of their attention.

“And why should I choose to elicit such a meaningless display?” she asked.

“Faith, 'tis far from meaningless, my dear. Sir Lancelot is quite the leader of a set – if he is seen to admire you, you will have no lack



of *chevaliers*.”

## Chapter 8

The next evening they were bid to attend a card party at Mrs. Rotherham's house.

“’Tis a very good beginning, very good indeed,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “But I do wish you would wear rouge, my dear. It is not at all the thing to go about with your face unpainted, quite as if you were a milkmaid! It is all very well while your complexion is so fresh, but a month in the smoke of London and you will lose your country bloom and so I warn you.”

“But, aunt, Miss Smythe has told me of ladies who were poisoned by their rouge. The beautiful Miss Gunnings, one of whom died at only seven-and-twenty—”

“The Miss Gunnings were subject to consumption. ’Tis a most scandalous, ill-natured rumour that they sickened from painting! They were the most beautiful women that ever were, and one of them married two dukes, and they did not disdain painting their faces, so you would do well to be less presumptuous, my dear girl, and do likewise.”

Since Amelia was not convinced that marrying two dukes rendered paint less dangerous, she was adamant, at least for the moment, for she suspected that the rosy glow of her skin was precisely what powder and paint were intended to imply, and preferred to brave the stares rather than cover up what charms she possessed. Mrs. Catchlove was forced to pass on to a review of her dress.

“Yes, that pink and lilac is quite becoming to you, my dear. Have you your fan? Faith, it does not match your dress. You should have got another one. Well, ’twill do for now, I suppose. But really, Amelia, you have a great deal too much gauze at your neck. You must make it follow the line of your bodice, so.”

“But, aunt,” Amelia protested, for Mrs. Catchlove was indicating what seemed a desperately low line across her bosom.

“I assure you, my dear, 'tis the fashion!”

“But, aunt, I cannot go into company so exposed. It seems – it is quite indecent.”

“La, how strange you are! You are here to show your charms, are you not? You will not get a husband if you go about dressed like a nun.”

Mrs. Catchlove seized Amelia's fichu and rearranged it to her satisfaction.

“There!” she said. “You look quite charming, never fear. Lord, there's nothing to blush about, Amelia.”

Amelia adjusted the cloth somewhat higher. After protracted debate, Mrs. Catchlove allowed an extra inch of filmy gauze, although Amelia still felt horribly exposed. Like a sultan's concubine, she thought, I am chided for my naked face and bid to bare my body.

“Have you your purse? We shall not play high, but you must be prepared to lose something, you know. Faith, is that all you have? Sure, Squire could have been more generous. It presents a very odd appearance to be stingy at cards.”

“But am I expected to lose all my money, aunt?” Amelia said. “How am I to buy clothes, if I lose my money at cards? I am sure my mother never intended I should be a gamester.”

“A gamester, indeed! Only for a genteel evening of whist! There will not be faro, I am sure, or if there is, the ladies will not be expected to play at it. Well, if you do not wish to run through your money, you may stake your pretty pearls. It is quite dashing to lose your jewels at play.”

Amelia clutched at the necklace about her throat.

“Oh, no, aunt, I cannot! These are Miss Smythe's pearls, which she lent to me. I cannot risk them. I had sooner stay at home than lose Miss Smythe's pearls!”

“Pon my soul, what a fuss you make about everything. Well, I will have to go bail for you, I suppose.” Mrs. Catchlove irritably bustled out of the room and returned with a pair of diamond stud earrings. “Here, put these on, my dear. I have not worn them this age, and you may lose them with my good will.”

Considerably subdued, Amelia followed her aunt to the waiting carriage. Not for the first time, she had been brought to a pitch of considerable agitation by her aunt Catchlove's strictures on the proper mode of behaviour for fashionable young ladies, and then disarmed by an instance of unlooked-for generosity. Amelia had been astonished again and again at how much at variance the fashion was with what she had hitherto been taught to consider seemly, but beneath all her aunt's anxiety that she should flirt outrageously and giggle at nothing and appear in shameless décolletage and paint her face and lose her jewels at gaming, there yet remained a good-hearted and possibly simple woman who wanted her niece to enjoy herself, be admired and get an agreeable husband. Amelia resolved to follow her aunt's dictates as much as she could.

Amelia made her curtsy to Mrs. Rotherham, who greeted them warmly. There were several gentlemen clustered nearby. Mrs. Rotherham indicated her husband.

Amelia looked at Mr. Rotherham curiously. He seemed out of place in his wife's drawing room, for his dress was the plainest of any there and he wore an old-fashioned bag wig with very little powder.

“How do you do, Miss Loftus?” he said. “I have heard your praises sung already.”

Amelia felt herself blushing.

“I do not know who could have done so, sir,” she said. He was about to answer, but Sir Lancelot Scoby came mincing up and forestalled him.

“Egad! Miss Loftus! My prayers are answered! 'Pon my soul, lovelier than ever! You don't know how I have pined for a sight of you.”

Amelia remembered her aunt's instructions.

“I am sure you have better things to do than pine for me, Sir Lancelot,” she said, as encouragingly as she could. Inwardly she felt ridiculous, hearing the coyness of her own tone. Mr. Rotherham moved away.

“Never!” cried Sir Lancelot. “I protest, I do but exist outside your presence!”

Amelia could think of no answer. She fluttered her fan and smiled more broadly.

Fortunately they were soon swept away to the card tables. Amelia found herself paired with Mrs. Seale, whose forbidding expression had already daunted her. She had not much to do for the remainder of the time until supper, but to apologize for the badness of her play.

At supper she was again approached by Sir Lancelot, but this time he had to surrender some share of her attention. A young man of nearer to her own age, but as extravagantly dressed and painted as Sir Lancelot, claimed to be struck by her also. Amelia could not think of many variations on the theme of disbelieving their protestations, but they appeared easily entertained, tittering and exclaiming at her every remark. At length she left off speaking, merely smiling and playing with her fan, and her two swains continued to praise her wit and vivacity.

It was near to two in the morning by the time Mrs. Catchlove and Amelia returned home. Wearily mounting the stairs to her bedchamber, Amelia found a sleepy maid awaiting her.

“Oh, Martha, I am sorry to keep you up so late.”

“Lord, I don't mind,” said Martha. “Sure what a fine lady you are already, staying out 'til all hours!” Martha bustled about assisting Amelia to undress. “Were there any lords there tonight, miss?”

“I don't think so, Martha, although I missed the names of half of the company.”

“Couldn't you tell a lord by his fine clothes?”

“No, indeed. The most gorgeous gentleman there bar one was Sir Lancelot Scoby, and although he is a baronet he is not a lord.”

Martha laid Amelia's dress reverently aside.

“Mrs. Burns says Sir Lancelot is a very fine gentleman,” she said.

“Does she also say that he is a very silly one?” said Amelia.

“Oh, lord, no miss,” Martha said. “How could he be, a baronet and a leader of fashion?” Amelia wondered if the housekeeper were unacquainted with Sir Lancelot, or merely disdained to take a country maid into her confidence, for she could hardly suppose that Mrs. Burns, a shrewd and efficient woman, was so dazzled by rank as Martha appeared to be. “Did you enjoy yourself, miss?”

“Not particularly. I was confined to a card table with that horrid Mrs. Seale, who complained of my play all evening. I suppose I should be grateful she was a good enough player to save some of my sixpences at any rate. And then at supper I was saddled with Sir Lancelot and another young gentleman as tedious as he! Oh, dear, Martha, I seem to be becoming quite ill-natured. I do nothing but complain to you.”

“Well, miss, I'm glad you feel sure of me,” Martha said simply.

“I do indeed. Having you to take care of me, I have one confidential friend at any rate. I am glad you at least are pleased with London.”

“Oh, yes, miss! It's ever so grand!”

Having vented her disappointment, Amelia was prepared to be amused by Martha's enthusiasm. However difficult Amelia found it to follow her aunt's instructions, Martha had no such problem with the education she was so readily imbibing from Mrs. Catchlove's maid and the rest of the household. Of the two of them, Martha's London season seemed to be the greater success to date.

## **Chapter 9**

Mrs. Catchlove's prediction proved accurate. Amelia bent her mind to the task of acquiring the flirtatious graces which Miss Smythe had so unaccountably omitted from her education. At a masked ball, at routs and at salons, Sir Lancelot hovered near her, protesting audibly how *épris* he was with the charming, the witty Miss Loftus, while she strove to adjust the level of her conversation to his inanities, and sure enough, some half dozen others came in his wake, professing to be also her admirers. At the theatre particularly it cost Amelia some effort to conceal her disappointment, for she had never seen a play before and she would have preferred to attend to the incomparable Mrs. Siddons on the stage rather than the stagy baronet in Mrs. Catchlove's box. There was nothing for it, however. Her aunt did not move in literary circles and soon enough Amelia realized how naive she had been to expect that, amid all the thousands of inhabitants of fashionable London, there should not be some dozens who were coarse and silly. It yet seemed unfortunate, nonetheless, that these

dozens should be precisely those amongst whom she must spend her time, and from amongst whom she must hope to acquire the husband who was to rescue her from the barbarities of country life.

“Well, my dear, it can't be helped,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “Men are but great boys, after all, and must have their vanities administered to. As for your wits and literary men, they are no more amusing than the fops and beaus, believe me. Your great men may be great in books and in the House of Commons, but at home with their wives they are as peevish and unreasonable as any other men. Take Sir Lancelot, my dear, for he's charming enough, and I'm sure will be no hard task master, but will let you amuse yourself even with writers and painters once you are wed.”

“Once we are wed! Aunt Catchlove, but you run on ahead of the facts!” Amelia said.

“To be sure he has made no declarations nor proposals, but they cannot be far off, my dear. I never saw such promising attentions.” Mrs. Catchlove smiled her complacency. “I knew I could get you a husband.”

“Really, aunt, I would rather have a husband who thinks a little less of his dress! Can you not contrive that I should meet someone of more sense than Sir Lancelot?”

“Pon my faith, what would you? There's Mr. Jenkins, I suppose, but you may find him harder to attach,” Mrs. Catchlove said doubtfully, for Mr. Jenkins was a gentleman of some fifty years and of a notably dour disposition.

“Surely there must be at least one gentleman in all of London who fits the golden mean between Sir Lancelot and Mr. Jenkins,” Amelia said, laughing despite her embarrassment.

“You are too nice, Amelia,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “You will not find any man without some defect. You had best make your mind up to it.”

Within two weeks of first meeting Amelia, Sir Lancelot justified Mrs. Catchlove's hopes.

“Oh, Miss Loftus, oh delectable and lovely Amelia, take pity on my poor heart and be mine!” he cried, so suddenly after Mrs. Catchlove had left the room that Amelia was quite taken by surprise.

“Sir Lancelot, I am very sorry I cannot return your – your regard. Pray excuse me.” And she rose to hurry after her aunt.

“Stay, stay!” said Sir Lancelot, seizing her hand. “Egad, Miss Amelia, you are too cruel!”

“Sir Lancelot, pray let me go! I do not mean to be cruel, but it is impossible we should suit. I hope you will be so good as to withdraw, for your own peace of mind and mine.”

“I cannot, fatal temptress! 'Pon my faith!” Amelia did not much relish this description of her charms, especially since Sir Lancelot seemed to be declaiming his declarations, very much as if he copied them from the stage.

“Sir, it is ungentlemanly thus to detain me! I cannot alter my resolution, however much you may importune me. It can only be distressing to us both to prolong this scene.”

“Distressing to us both? I declare, Miss Amelia, why should we both be distressed when you have only to say you will be mine and we may both be happy! Ah, yes, relent, dearest Amelia.”

Amelia tried once again to free her hand from his grasp. He held so securely to her fingers that she could not pull them away. She pulled desperately again and dragged Sir Lancelot to her. Nothing loathe, he seized her in his arms. Amelia shrieked. At this very moment Mrs. Catchlove bustled back into the room.

“Faith!” she cried, riveted to the spot by the agreeable sight of her niece in the baronet's embrace. “So you've agreed together



already? Bless my soul!"

Amelia struggled away from her impassioned suitor.

"We have *not* agreed," she said.

"I declare, what's to stop you? Go on, go on, Sir Lancelot. Don't let my presence deter you. Sure, if once you've had her in your arms she cannot mean to refuse you!" Mrs. Catchlove urged.

"Indeed I do," Amelia said. "Pray, aunt, do not be so partisan. I cannot accept Sir Lancelot."

"Cannot!" her aunt said. "Faith, what's to stop you, my dear?"

"I do not like him, aunt," Amelia said.

"Not like me! Zounds!" Sir Lancelot said. "How she tortures me! Egad!"

"Now, Amelia, you cannot know what you are saying," Mrs. Catchlove said. "Not like Sir Lancelot! Sure, he's as fine as any other gentleman you've met, I'll be bound. Accept him, my dear, and we may all be pleased."

"I am not pleased to accept him. I am sorry for his disappointment, and for yours, too, aunt, but I cannot accept him. I am convinced I should be as incapable of adding to his comfort as he is of adding to my happiness. Pray let the whole matter be at an end."

"Alas!" cried Sir Lancelot, striking a despairing attitude.

"Amelia, you ungrateful hussy, how can you say so. 'Pon my soul! You have lavished smiles enough upon him to owe him something, I suppose." Mrs. Catchlove paced about the room in her indignation.

"Aunt, if I smiled at him, it was at your instructions. You never told me I should be obliged to marry Sir Lancelot if I smiled at

him! If 'twere true, I should be bound to marry half a dozen men, at least, for I have never attempted to distinguish or encourage Sir Lancelot more than another.”

“Oh, faithless tormentor!” Sir Lancelot interjected. Neither Amelia nor her aunt paid any attention.

“Faith, you'll never find any perfect husband, Amelia, I told you so before. How can you go on, refusing all offers? First Mr. Arkwright, who I'm sure was a very proper man and had your father's approval, and now Sir Lancelot, who is so well regarded by all our circle.”

“Be he never so well regarded by everyone else, I will not have him, aunt! Come, why should we quarrel? Sir Lancelot has known me but a fortnight, after all. I cannot believe his disappointment will run very deep. And the season is not even begun. I have no aversion to wed, I assure you! I ask only a more reasonable bridegroom.”

“Reasonable!” said Sir Lancelot. “I am all aflame and she speaks of cold reason!” He fluttered his handkerchief before his face as if to cool his ardour.

“Sure, you are mistaken, Amelia,” said Mrs. Catchlove. “Sir Lancelot is quite reasonable. I am sure he will abridge no pleasure of yours, nor expect his wife to be anything except young and giddy. Is it not so, Sir Lancelot?” she continued, turning to the afflicted baronet at last.

“Egad! She may be as wild as bedamned if only she will be mine!” he asserted.

“But I do not want to be young and giddy, or even as wild as bedamned,” Amelia said. “I want a husband I can respect.” And with this parting reflection she ran from the room.

“Oh, Sir Lancelot!” Mrs. Catchlove said, “how I feel for you!”

“Your sympathy, madam, would console me even in this loss - egad! I might lose my scarlet coat with gold and diamond buttons, and still be consoled if you would but sympathize.”

“Do not be downcast, Sir, I will reason with her, I will set upon her. Tis a headstrong girl, but you shall triumph in the end.”

While her aunt and her suitor thus took counsel, Amelia fled to her chamber. She found Martha there, putting away her linen with nosegays tied up in little bags.

“Oh, Martha! What a to-do I have been through!” Amelia said, throwing herself upon her bed.

“Whatever is the matter, Miss Amelia?”

“I have received an offer from Sir Lancelot Scoby.”

“Oh, miss! You're never going to be married so soon!”

“You are right,” Amelia said, laughing at Martha's wide-eyed enthusiasm. “I am never going to marry Sir Lancelot.”

Martha looked disappointed.

“Why ever not, miss?” she asked.

“Oh, Martha! He is quite as silly and as tedious as Mr. Arkwright. Oh, are there no proper gentlemen at all? I have met only one gentleman in London or anywhere else who seems a sensible man, and he is married already, besides thinking me an outrageous empty-headed flirt, I'm sure.”

“But miss, what do you want? I'm sure Sir Lancelot has enough embroidery on his coat to satisfy anyone.”

Amelia laughed again, albeit drearily.

“Oh, dear, silly Martha. I want a man who thinks more of me than

of his coats and laces. I want a man who is sensible and kind, and can talk without lisping and walk without prancing – and – and who I could look up to as my superior in understanding and education. For, sure, marriage must be a desperate business if one is to honour and obey someone inferior to oneself!” Amelia finished so woefully that Martha looked stricken. She got up on the bed, and heedless of all instruction in the art of maiding a lady, kissed her young mistress.

“Oh, miss, I'm sure there can be no one more good and clever than you.” Amelia was surprised, touched and even comforted by this artless tribute.

“Oh, Martha, no one has said anything so nice to me since I came to London. Sir Lancelot only rattles on about my looks and my wit, and I'm sure he does not know what wit is. I am not so good or so clever as you think me, but it is kind in you to think so all the same.”

Martha blushed.

“Well, if Sir Lancelot does not think so as much as me he has no business to expect you to marry him,” she declared stoutly. “Oh, miss, if you could but meet a lord, I'm sure he would think you good and clever.”

“If I met a lord, ten-to-one he'd be in his dotage, or married already,” Amelia said.

## **Chapter 10**

Uproar and drama cannot much interrupt the normal course of life. Several days later, when they were to go to Vauxhall with a large party, Amelia was quite satisfied to be dressed in a new silk gown of green and white stripes over a petticoat of pale green, with a lace tippet held in place about her shoulders by her aunt

Catchlove's treasured emerald pin. They rode in a closed carriage with Sir Lancelot, but the tedium of his conversation was allayed by the pleasure Amelia felt in walking about once they were arrived. So delightful was the vista of gardens lighted up by innumerable lanterns and pavilions beneath the trees, crowded with all orders of society, that Amelia quite forgot herself and permitted Sir Lancelot to take her arm as they strolled about. Indeed, she was glad of some male escort, for there seemed to be many young men about quite prepared to ogle all the young ladies and even to approach any who were so unfortunate or so brazen as to be separated from their protectors.

They met Lady Farrington and Mr. and Mrs. Rotherham, who had come in Mr. Rotherham's carriage.

Mr. Rotherham was some years older than his wife. It seemed to Amelia as she curtsied to him that he was in no very amiable mood, although he was trying to suppress his ill humour.

"How do you do, Miss Loftus? But I can see you are in high beauty tonight," Mr. Rotherham said, falling in beside her as Sir Lancelot made his bow to Lady Farrington.

"Pray, do not feel you must make me any fulsome compliments, Mr. Rotherham," she said. "I have had too many of late to be desirous of anything but simplicity." To her surprise he smiled at this, far more warmly than before. They strolled on together.

"I have thought you were not so giddy as you pretend to be," he said. Amelia laughed.

"Thank you," she said. "You can have no idea how much work it is to be a young lady."

"No more than it is to be a gallant," he said dryly.

"There is something troubling you, Mr. Rotherham."

"No, indeed, I am only abashed by your candour, ma'am."

“Pray let us not fence, sir. I do not wish to break in upon your reserve, but neither do I demand any false gaiety from you. We may be silent if you prefer.”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Loftus. It is rare to meet a young lady who values simplicity. I feel no qualms at confiding in you. I *am* troubled – a friend of mine has disappeared. He rode off one night, after his carriage had broken down on the road from London to Cheswick – his estate – and has no more been seen. I had a visit this morning from his secretary, whom he left with the carriage. Poor Mr. Newcombe was in no very calm state of mind.”

“Tis rather thoughtless of your friend, to be sure,” Amelia said.

“More than thoughtless. It is so unlike him that I fear some dreadful accident must have overtaken him. There have been highwaymen about of late.”

“How long ago did this happen?”

“Five days,” Mr. Rotherham said. He lapsed into abstraction, and Amelia forbore to interrupt his reverie. She had not long to wait, for he came to himself with a start, and said, “Once more I beg your pardon, Miss Loftus. The vagaries of a gentleman you have never met can hold little interest for you.” She was about to protest, but he said, “We seem to have become separated from the others. We had best rejoin them, for I believe a box has been reserved for us to sup in.” They retraced their steps, and soon found the others gathered in one of the pavilions divided into private rooms.

“Just as I thought,” Mrs. Rotherham said. “I suppose I am to be jealous, Mr. Rotherham, that you should be flirting with such a pretty girl.” Amelia wondered that Mrs. Rotherham should be so indifferent to her husband's sombre mood. She thought she could detect a grimace that sat ill on his kindly face, but it was quickly suppressed.

“I think we have not been gone long,” Mr. Rotherham said, in such a tone as made Amelia wonder if his wife's facetiousness had been put on on purpose to goad him.

“Oh, Miss Loftus, abandoning me for another! I am distraught,” Sir Lancelot said.

“Surely not, sir,” she said, and immediately was conscious that her tone was much like Mr. Rotherham's. With half an ear she attended to the sprightly exchange of commiseration between Mrs. Rotherham and Sir Lancelot, while she pondered how rare it was to encounter a sensible man, and how often must people of sense find themselves constrained to marry people of very little sense indeed. It was a depressing reflection, and her concern for Mr. Rotherham's fate was not more keen than her alarm for her own.

Mrs. Catchlove seemed in such high good humour as to flirt with Sir Lancelot herself, and Amelia had more than one interval in which she might sit quietly and wish she was sufficiently adept to single out Mr. Rotherham and permit him some periods of quiet. She had been astonished to see how fashionable ladies laid their commands on gentlemen, and how the gentlemen obeyed in all tiresome and trivial things, but Amelia was not yet sufficiently hardened to make any essay of her own authority.

When it came time to depart at last, Amelia found herself a little apart with Mr. Rotherham, and said,

“I hope you will soon have good news of your friend, sir.” He smiled and pressed her hand. It seemed he might even have carried it to his lips but Sir Lancelot called to her, from within her aunt's carriage.

“Come, be quick, Miss Loftus, we languish without you!” Amelia hurried on. She was scarce in the carriage before the coachman had whipped up his horses. Amelia fell back against the scarlet cushions and perceived that her aunt Catchlove was not there. She was alone with Sir Lancelot Scoby.

“Where is my aunt, Sir Lancelot?” Amelia said.

“Why, with the Rotherhams,” Sir Lancelot replied. “Did she not tell you that 'twas all arranged?”

“No, sir, she did not. I should certainly not have consented to an hour's ride alone with you.”

“Egad, Miss Loftus, your coldness pierces me to the heart! Relent, relent, I pray!” Sir Lancelot fluttered his handkerchief in token of his lovelorn condition.

“Come, Sir Lancelot, do not be playing the gallant, please,” Amelia said. “I conceive that my aunt and you have plotted together to give you this opportunity.”

“We have indeed. Excellent woman! She smiles upon my suit.”

“But I, Sir Lancelot, do not.”

“Oh, she is charming!” he said, pressing his hands to his impressionable bosom.

“Really, Sir Lancelot, I cannot comprehend why you should think so. I tell you in all seriousness that I have no desire to hear any such professions from you, so if you cannot converse sensibly on indifferent subjects, pray let us be silent.” And Amelia turned away from the impassioned baronet, and looked at the blank darkness out the window.

This was perhaps a misjudged action on her part, for the next moment she found herself enveloped in his arms. It was not the most graceful of embraces, since she was turned away from him, and furthermore the coach was still jolting along at a good pace. Amelia struggled fiercely to free herself, but she had no homely needle with which to fend off this unwanted suitor.

“Sir Lancelot!” she said furiously. She got one arm free and slapped his face.



“Egad!” said Sir Lancelot. “You’ve put my wig askew, you jade.” He released her to adjust his precious perruque.

Amelia laughed scornfully.

“I hope, Sir Lancelot, you are now convinced we should not suit,” she said.

“Pon my faith, Miss Loftus, not at all,” he said, regaining his equanimity with an effort. “I am more enchanted than ever. Such spirit! Such wit!” He made to seize her in his arms once more.

“Hold!” cried a voice outside. The horses were pulled up abruptly, and the jolt flung Sir Lancelot onto his knees.

“My stockings,” he cried. The next instant the door of the coach was flung open.

“Never mind your stockings, sir,” said a musical voice. “It’s your jewels and your purse I’d be relieving you of.”

Sir Lancelot gave a shocked whimper and scrambled back into the furthest corner of the coach.

“Come, sir, there’s no need to take on so,” said the highwayman. “You hand over your valuables quiet-like, and no harm will come to you.”

Tremblingly, Sir Lancelot complied, although a suppressed lament escaped him as he parted with his diamond stock-pin. The highwayman then turned to Amelia.

“Madam, your jewels.” Indignantly Amelia handed over her earrings and her rings. “And the brooch, madam.”

“It is not mine,” she said, as boldly as she could. “It is my aunt’s, I cannot give it to you.”

“If your aunt were here I doubt not but she would hand it over without delay. You'd best do the same. I'm sure your husband will bear you out you have not stolen it yourself.”

“He is not my husband,” Amelia said hotly. The highwayman raised his eyebrows, but said merely,

“Your husband or your lover, 'tis all the same to me. The pin, madam.”

“Wait,” Amelia said. “I will give you the pin right gladly, if you will escort me from here. I do not wish to continue in this gentleman's company.”

The highwayman laughed.

“Sure the Quality's all run mad, I think. Come out then, madam.”

Amelia climbed out.

“Miss Loftus!” Sir Lancelot cried. “Come back, my love, come back! Do not leave me! Egad!”

The highwayman swung into the saddle of his waiting horse. He put down his hand to Amelia, who stepped up quite nimbly onto his boot and settled herself before him.

“Your servant, sir,” the highwayman said to Sir Lancelot. He touched his spurs to the horse's flanks, and disappeared with Amelia into the night.

## **Chapter 11**

Sir Lancelot sat staring blankly long after they had gone.

“Egad!” he said. Finally he roused himself to exertion, and bade

the coachman drive on.

“Egad!” he repeated. “What am I to do?” Even in his self-involvement and his mourning for his diamonds, Sir Lancelot perceived that it was a serious business to have mislaid his lady-love. His first thought was to slink away to his own home, but in his abstraction he forgot to issue any fresh orders to the coachman, and thus found himself delivered to Mrs. Catchlove's door. Mrs. Catchlove's coachman having been given orders to take the long way round, the better to give Sir Lancelot's eloquence and ardour full play, he found his hostess there before him. Hesitantly he mounted the steps to the front portal.

“Well, sir?” Mrs. Catchlove asked, meeting him at the door in her eagerness to discover the success of their strategy. “Where is Amelia? Is she too bashful to appear? Come out, dear niece! Sure, there's nothing to be timid about in changing your mind.”

“No, madam, she is not within the coach,” Sir Lancelot said.

“Not within the coach? Where else should she be?”

“Egad, madam, I know no more than you.”

“Strooth! Has the minx run off then? Sure, I'd have wagered a hundred guineas I saw her get into the carriage as unsuspecting as a lamb.”

“That she did, dear madam, but on the road we were beset by highwaymen,” Sir Lancelot confessed unhappily. “Six of them,” he added, in consolation to his dignity.

“Highwaymen! Six of them? 'Pon my soul, what has happened to Amelia?”

“They – they abducted her, madam.”

Mrs. Catchlove shrieked and staggered. Sir Lancelot caught her in his arms, and although she made an ample armful, prevented her

falling.

“Abducted her! Help, murder, rape!”

“Madam, calm yourself,” Sir Lancelot said, for Mrs. Catchlove's cries were attracting all the servants of her household, and he was quite conscious of the mischievous construction which might be placed on his blameless attempts to succour her. Mrs. Catchlove heedlessly continued to shriek until her own woman and Mrs. Burns came up to bear her indoors. Sir Lancelot followed unhappily.

“Oh, my poor Amelia! Oh, what can I say to her father? Oh, help!”

“Mrs. Catchlove, 'pon my soul, you carry on too much. All may yet be well,” Sir Lancelot offered.

“Well? How can it be well? My poor Amelia, torn from my protection, carried off! Why did you not stop them?”

“Consider, madam, there were six of them,” Sir Lancelot said, glad of his improvisation now that Mrs. Catchlove had turned her lamentations to reproaches. “I fought them as fiercely as any man could! But they were too many for me. I – I received a fearsome blow on the head. There's a devilish lump under my wig, 'pon my honour.”

“Oh, Sir Lancelot, forgive me. Let us attend to your wounds.”

“No, no, madam,” he demurred hastily. “They are nothing compared to poor Amelia's fate.”

“Oh!” Mrs. Catchlove shrieked again. “We must summon the Bow Street runners this instant. Faith, who could believe such an outrage in this day and age?”

Who indeed? The representative of Sir Robert Fielding's estimable forces of law and order looked highly sceptical at Sir Lancelot's account. Looking from the downcast suitor to the distraught aunt,

Mr. North invited Sir Lancelot to step out into the hall with him.

“Now, Sir Lancelot, is there nothing in your evidence you might like to think better of? We don't often get highwaymen making off with their victims. Much quicker and safer just to make off with their victims' valuables, sir.”

Sir Lancelot drew himself up to his full height.

“Do you doubt my word, sir?” he said.

“Oh, no, Sir Lancelot, not at all,” said the runner. “Only that the good lady in her distress might have misunderstood you. Very natural, I'm sure. Now, six highwaymen, you say?”

“Well, sir, 'pon my honour I could not absolutely swear to six,” Sir Lancelot admitted grudgingly. “Perhaps there might be only five or even four.”

“Yes, sir, four highwaymen.”

“They moved about so, 'twas devilish difficult to count them.”

“Of course, sir. You had something better to do than count highwaymen. So first they took your purse and your jewels and then the ruffians dragged Miss Loftus from the coach.”

“Egad! Yes,” Sir Lancelot said, relieved to meet with such calm acceptance.

“And you rushed out to defend her.”

“Zounds! Of course I did! Devilish pretty gal, Miss Loftus.”

“Might you not have mistaken their intentions? Perhaps they only meant to seize her rings from her fingers, not drag her from the carriage.”

“Mistake! Damme, she's gone, ain't she?”

“That's true,” the runner replied, nodding judiciously. “Now, was there anyone who might have had an interest in abducting Miss Loftus? Some rejected suitor, maybe?”

“Rejected suitor?” Sir Lancelot repeated, staring at the runner. “Damme, she rejected me and I never thought of abducting her. Why should anyone else?”

“She rejected you, sir?”

“Egad!” Sir Lancelot said. “Yes. Ten thousand pounds dangling out of my reach.”

“You were riding alone together in a coach and she rejected your advances? Did Miss Loftus perhaps leave the coach of her own free will, sir?”

“Damme!” the harassed baronet shouted. “I told you she was taken by highwaymen! Six of them,” he concluded belligerently.

“Yes, sir. And on struggling against them you received a grievous blow to the head.”

“That's right,” Sir Lancelot agreed, with the dignity due to his feat of knight errantry.

“Might I see this bump on the head, sir?”

“You don't think I'm going to take my wig off once I've got it on straight again, do you?”

“Of course not, sir,” said the runner. “I'll be off to find these desperate villains without delay, then.” He took his leave with great courtesy and rejoined his lieutenant outside.

“It seems Sir Lancelot Scoby and a young lady who rejected his proposals were driving along in their coach, when they were stopped by six gents of the High Toby who abducted the young

lady,” the runner confided.

“Coo,” said the lieutenant. “Think what a novel Sir Robert's brother might have made of that. As good as Jonathan Wilde, I'd say.”

“Quite.”

“Think the young lady jumped out of the carriage to be quit of yon macaroni, then?”

“So I'd say. We'd best look out for the young lady at any rate. Not the thing to have young ladies trudging along the roads alone at night. She might meet with a highwayman. They've been thick in these parts of late.”

The two runners had their own coach waiting, and now set out to retrace the path of Mrs. Catchlove's carriage.

## **Chapter 12**

The earl was within the snuggerly when Dick Gamble returned. Having quite made up his mind to leave that morning, he wished to make his adieus properly to the friend who had introduced him to such exotic company as he had enjoyed for near to a week past.

To pass the time the earl was entertaining one Nell Kelly, a lady of the streets. He had bought three rounds of spirit already, and was thus completely in the lady's confidence. It was not the etiquette at the thieves' snuggerly to inquire into the doings of chance-met acquaintances, and the earl had bent himself to adopt such customs as would not offend his company, but Mistress Kelly of her own accord was deep into a minute account of the attentions of a fine gentleman which had launched her upon her present career. Looking at the bitter lines beneath her paint, and hearing the wistfulness lurking in her voice as she mocked at honest drudges, the earl was uncomfortably aware of a feeling of guilt stirring in

his own breast. The fine gentleman, who beset and overcame the mistrust of the naive kitchen maid that Nell once was, bore an uncomfortable resemblance to himself, and he wondered he should never before have thought on what became of the objects of his fleeting intrigues. But no hint of this inner unease appeared. The earl was at his most urbane and most charming, and Mistress Kelly was quite in a flutter.

There came a signal at the front door, and as always there was a suspension in the talk and laughter within.

“That'll be Dick,” said Meg from behind her bar, and Simon went to open to him. He came back into the room laughing. Dick Gamble came in and Amelia with him.

As the earl had done six days earlier, Amelia stood upon the threshold, surprised at the contrast between the ruined aspect of the inn as seen from the road and the comfort within.

Dick Gamble crossed to the earl's table and Amelia followed. Dick flung himself laughing into a chair.

“Faith, but it's a fine haul I've made tonight!” he said. “The gentleman's purse, jewels and lady-love all in three minutes.”

To abduct young ladies was so out of keeping with the highwayman's character that the earl was confused. He rose, however, and bowed Amelia to a seat, with great aplomb.

“May I offer you some refreshment, madam?” he said.

“Yes, please, sir,” Amelia said. “For it's been a terribly exciting evening and I would be very glad of some lemonade.”

Mistress Kelly choked. The earl raised his eyebrows but said only,

“I will discover whether any can be found.” He went to the bar.

“Whatever is Dick about, Mr. Warwick?” said Meg. “That's no



fancy mort he's brought with him. By her face, 'tis a country maid, but by her clothes, 'tis a fine lady.”

“I will endeavour to find out, Mistress Meg,” said the earl, the corners of his mouth twitching. “In the meantime, have you anything to give her to drink? Beer or spirits will not do, I am afraid.”

“Lord luv you, sir, no indeed. Mayhap a bottle of ginger-beer? I am sure I have seen one in the cellar anytime this five years.”

“I should think that would do excellently,” said the earl. “And a round for the rest of us, not excluding the erratic Dick.” He went back to his friends.

“Strooth, what a fine, lisping, prancing little gentleman it was!” Dick was informing Nell. “And cowering back on the cushions like a whipped dog. Then when I had lightened his purse and stripped him soundly, I turns to milady here. But would she part with that sparkler? By my troth she would not! Unless I carry her off, says she. I think I have been infected with Warwick's distemper, for what must I do but obey my lady's commands.” He broke out into another peal of laughter.

“Madam, did you in sober truth demand he should take you with him?” the earl said to Amelia.

“I did, sir,” she said stoutly, “and for my honour's sake. I would not stay with Sir Lancelot, for he was determined to make love to me, and tricked me into the carriage alone with him.”

“Sir Lancelot?” said the earl.

“Sir Lancelot Scoby,” Amelia confirmed. An alarming change overcame the earl, for he opened his eyes quite wide, turned red in the face and seemed with difficulty to keep down some inner tumult.

“Do you know him, sir?” Amelia asked.

The earl's struggles were in vain. He gave a great whooping laugh.

"Sir Lancelot Scoby," he gasped finally, and then was overcome again. "Sir Lancelot Scoby! Oh, Dick, I'd have given a thousand pounds to be there to see it!"

"I wish ye had then," Dick said dryly. "Do ye know this pretty fellow?"

"Know him! I have stumbled over him any time this five years. Sir Lancelot Scoby!" The earl uttered a final snort of laughter and then turned again to Amelia.

"What mad start made you get into a coach with him, madam, if you were not desirous of love making?" he asked.

"I told you, I was tricked! I thought my aunt Catchlove would be there also, as she was on the journey out. But my aunt and Sir Lancelot arranged it between them, for she wishes me to marry him. But I would as lief marry Mr. Arkwright, which I have already declared I would not do if he were the last man on earth!"

Nell and Dick listened to this embittered discourse with every sign of delighted hilarity, but the earl, who was as much more entertained as he was more familiar with certain of the chief characters mentioned in it, preserved an attentive gravity of demeanour.

"Nonetheless, madam, do you not perceive how foolish it was to cast yourself upon the protection of a highwayman? Fortunately for you, our friend Dick is the soul of honour and the most devoted father and husband on the High Toby, but it might have gone badly for you, I tell you most solemnly."

"I don't care!" Amelia said. "I will not marry that puppy, or any other puppy, and my aunt doesn't seem to know any other kind of man, except Mr. Rotherham, who is very good and sensible, but he is already married and I will not go back there."

Nell Kelly looked much shocked.

“La, madam, you don't know what you are saying,” she said earnestly. “Turned down two fine gents already, have you, that could have kept you in silks and laces. You look at me, madam, and think how lucky you are.”

Amelia looked obediently at Mistress Kelly, but could perceive only that the lady's demeanour was as much freer than her own as her toilette was less tidied. In her country innocence Amelia thought that Mistress Kelly's lady's maid must be a shocking bad servant.

“Well, I must convey you home,” the earl said.

“But I don't want to go home,” said Amelia.

“Nonetheless you shall go.” The earl turned to the highwayman. “I must be off, Dick. But you will hear from me again, and that without any long delay. So take no foolish chances until we meet again.” The two men shook hands heartily.

“I'm sorry to lose you, but it's only right you should go back to your own house and your own friends,” said Dick. The earl looked Amelia over and said,

“I have only one horse, but if you could ride up with Dick, you may ride up with me, I suppose.”

“But I don't want to go,” Amelia repeated.

The earl opened his mouth to annihilate her, when a sudden silence made him look around. Black Billy Thurl was at the door.

Thurl strode up to Nell, who shrank back piteously.

“What are you a'doin' of here,” he snarled, seizing her wrist. “You work for me, my fine lady, and you should be out earning my due.

I don't suffer you for your own pleasure, sitting in snuggeries making up to fine gentlemen." He glanced at the earl. "Out with you, you jade!"

The earl flicked Black Billy's sleeve with his glove. The rogue released Nell to confront this new assault upon his authority.

"I would prefer you do not terrorize Mistress Kelly," the earl said quietly, but in the absolute silence it was clearly heard by all.

"What you might prefer or not prefer is nought to do with me," Thurl said. "The mort is mine and does what I say."

"Not, I think, tonight," said the earl. He met Black Billy's gaze coolly. "Swords or pistols or what you will," he said in answer to the intent he read there.

Black Billy laughed harshly.

"I'm no fine gentleman as you are," he said. "I've no servants to bow and scrape to me, and no ruddy farmers to curse me when they pay their rack-rents neither. We common folk don't fight duels. It's a knife you'll get in the back one dark night from me, good sir, and I'll not be the one to hang for it, neither."

"Oh, no, sir, please, say no more!" Nell said. "He means what he says. He'll kill you and me too if you meddle with him. I know I've done wrong, Billy. I'll be off now." She clung appealingly to Black Billy's sleeve. "Don't stick him, Billy. He meant no harm."

Thurl shrugged her off. It seemed only a casual gesture, but Nell was thrown to the floor. She scrambled up and scuttled from the room.

Black Billy turned his back on the earl and stalked to the bar. The other guests averted their eyes and began to talk industriously amongst themselves.

The earl seemed as if he would follow, but Dick seized him.

“No,” the highwayman said in a low urgent voice. “You’d do better to get this young lady out of it.” The earl looked at Amelia’s frightened face.

“Yes, please, I want to go home now,” she said.

The sky was grey with the coming dawn as the earl set Amelia down at her aunt’s door. It was that chill moment when even the wildest bucks had left the streets and none save the watch perceived the horse with two riders. Amelia, sober and shaken by the glimpse she had been accorded of a different mode of female existence, looked up into his face with a most speaking countenance.

“Inside with you now,” the earl said. “You’ll be none the worse for your night’s adventures after a sound sleep. And do not be frightened into accepting that decrepit fop after all. There will be no lack of men of parts to seek you out, with your face and your spirit, madam, if you do but let them be seen.”

“Thank you, sir,” Amelia said with a grave simplicity that most plainly skipped over the compliment of the moment to the more substantial service he had rendered her. “Will – will you not step in and refresh yourself?”

“No need,” he said. “My own house is not far off.”

Amelia went up the steps, knocked upon the door and was admitted. Only when she was already within did she realize that she had not asked where he lived, or even his name. She turned back to look out the door, but he was already gone.

The earl waited only to see Amelia disappear through the door, and turned his horse’s head towards home. He stabled and rubbed down the weary beast himself, taking care not to disturb the stable-boy’s slumbers, and then he let himself into his house with his own key. He could hear some faint sounds of the servants stirring in the back offices. With a grin he went softly to his morning room,

intending to ring from there and command his breakfast as if he had never been away.

He stopped short in the doorway. Henry Newcombe was there, pacing the room in a manner that plainly bespoke his wretchedness of spirits. The secretary looked up.

“My lord,” he said. He rushed up to the earl and seized his hand. “Is it really you? Thank God you are home safe!”

“Henry, I am a scoundrel not to have sent you word. You must have been eaten up with nameless fears.”

Newcombe laughed shakily.

“No matter,” he said. “You are truly safe? You have taken no hurt?”

“Not the slightest. I have been exceedingly merry for this past week, and I have no excuse for worrying you, except that I did not want my entertainment broken into.”

“My lord, where have you been? We heard a shot that night the coach broke down, and the men rode to your aid, thinking you had been waylaid by highwaymen, but no sign of you could we find, alive or dead.”

“I am quite alive, Henry. I am as alive as I have ever been. I feel I have just woken up from thirty years' torpor.” Newcombe, gazing joyously upon his employer, was yet further relieved, for the earl looked vigorously pleased with life as he had not done for some time past.

“But where have you been, my lord?” Newcombe repeated. The earl laughed.

“I was indeed waylaid by highwaymen – or at least one highwayman, and as fine a fellow he turned out to be as you could want to meet. I – uh – convinced him to accept of my company,

and have kept to him all this time.”

“You have not been robbing coaches, my lord!” Newcombe said.

“No, Henry, I have not gone so far as that. Merely I have laid up in a thieves' den, and sympathized in the difficulties of a highwayman's profession. 'Tis not all roses, believe me. I had no idea, how often a gentleman of the High Toby might come away from his night's labours with scarce enough to feed his horse upon. I must do something for good Dick, in truth I must.”

Then, seeing his secretary's stricken look, the earl laughed again.

“No, Henry, I have not run mad. But I have met with a class of people I never before had heeded, and I trust I am the better for the enlightenment of it. Have I any farms going begging?”

“I beg your pardon, my lord?”

“Have I any farms lacking a farmer? Something on which an honest man might keep a wife and see his sons provided for.”

“I don't know, my lord. Would you wish me to enquire?”

“Pray do, and let me know of it as soon as might be. And also, do you know Mrs. Catchlove?”

“Than vulgar harridan! I know of her, my lord.”

“She has, I believe, a niece staying with her at present. A young lady of perhaps twenty, just come from somewhere in the country. I would be vastly obliged, sir, if you would find me out this young lady's name – and parentage. Discreetly, of course.”

“Of course, my lord,” said Newcombe, now utterly bemused.

The earl laughed again, apparently only from surfeit of good spirits. Newcombe, still doubtful, yet felt that his anxieties were well repaid by seeing his lordship himself and more than himself

again.

## Chapter 13

Amelia perceived immediately that she was not destined to slip quietly up to her bedchamber. The hall was brightly lit and both footmen and Martha were on watch for news.

“Oh, Miss Amelia, are you home safe?” Martha said, flinging herself into her mistress' arms.

“Of course I am, Martha. There, there. Do not let yourself be overwrought. I have taken no hurt.”

Mrs. Catchlove now came rushing into the hall, and half-smothered her niece in the violence of her concern.

“Oh, my dear, I thought I'd never see you again! What would your dear parents have said if I had lost you?”

“Indeed, aunt, if you had not played me such a trick with Sir Lancelot we might have all come quietly home without interruption,” Amelia said, disengaging herself from Mrs. Catchlove's embrace.

“Faith, even if I had been in the coach, I could not have fought off six highwaymen,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “Oh, my dear, how is it you have evaded their clutches? 'Tis an event beyond my fondest hopes, I assure you.”

“Has Sir Lancelot told you of six highwaymen who carried me off, aunt?” Amelia said, feeling herself dangerously close to a fit of hysterical laughter.

“Of course, my love. He came straight to me after you were abducted, and we called in the Bow Street runners without delay.



Sure, 'twas the least we could do.”

Sir Lancelot came slinking into the hall. He bowed awkwardly to Amelia.

“Oh, Sir Lancelot, you should not have regaled my aunt with such a horrific story,” Amelia said sweetly.

“Egad, Miss Amelia, she was bound to notice your absence,” Sir Lancelot said. He looked as unhappy as he must feel, for he could only look forward to having his heroic account contradicted.

“I wager you made light of your own heroic conduct, too,” Amelia said in the same sweet tone. Sir Lancelot, perceiving that for some reason Amelia was refraining from exposing him, looked suddenly animated.

“Indeed he did,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “But it could not be entirely concealed how he was wounded in your defence, and I declare, Amelia, if it does not make you love him, you are a monstrous ungrateful girl. Sure, you must be bound to have him now!”

“On the contrary,” Amelia said. “I now expect Sir Lancelot’s conduct to be equally gentlemanly in desisting from any further attentions to me.”

“Pon my soul, Amelia, you cannot mean it,” Mrs. Catchlove said.

“Indeed I do,” Amelia said calmly. “I am sure, Sir Lancelot, you will be more than willing not to persist. It would be so disappointing to my aunt to find your conduct less heroic than she had thought.”

Sir Lancelot seemed dimly to catch her meaning.

“Now, Sir Lancelot, do not listen to Amelia, I beg of you. She is distraught, she knows not what she is saying. Let her but have a day or two to recover from her fright and she will think quite differently. Do not lose heart.”

Sir Lancelot was cast into the utmost perturbation. He understood Amelia's threat to unmask his paltry behaviour and his exaggerations well enough, but he could not think how to decline Mrs. Catchlove's advice.

“Egad!” said he. “Pon my soul! Egad!” He could think of nothing further to say.

“But, Amelia, how is it you escaped these desperate villains?” Mrs. Catchlove asked.

“Oh,” said Amelia. “I cannot very well account for it except – except to think they must have mistaken me for some other lady, and when they found they had the wrong victim they lost all interest in me.”

“But never say you walked the whole way home,” cried Mrs. Catchlove.

“Oh, no. One of them carried me on his horse to the very door. I must say he was most gentleman-like, and the mare was a fine spirited creature as well.”

“Pon my soul, Amelia, you've had a narrow escape. 'Tis more than many people will credit, I am sure,” Mrs. Catchlove said. Amelia was guiltily conscious of the truth of this and made no reply.

“Lord, we must call off the Runners. It might be most ruinous if it came to Lady Farrington or any of the others' ears. My dear, I think you had better marry Sir Lancelot without delay.”

“Oh, no, aunt, I'm sure no one will hear of it,” Amelia protested, herself somewhat alarmed. “Sir Lancelot and you will tell no one, I am sure, and how else should the whole matter become known?”

“My dear, I'm sure I don't know, but everyone always seems to be perfectly informed of anything the least bit discomfoting. Sir Lancelot, don't you agree you two should be married immediately?”

“Egad!” said Sir Lancelot unhappily. “I should be transported with joy.”

“Surely it is unnecessary,” Amelia said hastily. “Sir Lancelot's honour is untarnished after all, and I have taken no hurt.”

“Amelia, I am monstrous glad you are not hurt, but if anyone else should doubt otherwise!” Mrs. Catchlove said. “A lady's good name is not so easily maintained. Come, come, change your mind, my dear, say you accept Sir Lancelot, and we may all seek our beds without a care.”

“I cannot, aunt,” Amelia said. “Though I should be glad to go to bed. I am quite worn out, and so, I am sure, are you.”

Not immediately was Amelia to gain any repose, however, for at that moment the Runners returned.

“Oh, Mr. North, she is come home safe!” Mrs. Catchlove said as that worthy official was shown in. Mr. North bowed to Amelia.

“Well, it's a fine thing you should have got home unaided, Miss, after all your adventures,” Mr. North said. “It quite puts us off, to be sure, but we had rather be useless than be required to seek after your murderers.”

Amelia laughed.

“I am quite well, sir,” she said. Mr. North did not miss the strain in her laughter and said, with genuine consideration,

“Perhaps you would do better to retire, miss. I should be glad of your account of this affair, but tomorrow is soon enough, I think, if I may have your leave to call upon you then.”

“Certainly, sir,” Amelia said faintly. She bade her aunt good-night and fled upstairs, relieved to be done with telling tales for one night.

“Oh, miss, you must have been so frightened!” Martha said, once they were within Amelia's bedchamber. “I'm sure I should have died if six highwaymen had carried me off!”

Amelia startled her devoted handmaiden by going off into uncontrollable laughter. Alarmed, Martha fell back upon her regular duties, hastily lifting the dress over her head, undoing her stays, bringing her her nightclothes and cap to preserve her coiffure, and washing her face for her. Throughout these ministrations, Amelia continued to giggle, until the tears came to her eyes. Finally, worn out, she sighed and said,

“Six of them! Oh, lord! Martha, there weren't six highwaymen. There was but one.”

“One? Sure, Sir Lancelot ought to have been able to keep you safe from only one highwayman,” Martha said.

Amelia began to giggle again, but made an effort and said,

“He never made the slightest move, except to cower in the corner of the coach!”

“And everyone declared how brave he was. Oh, Miss, was it all a lie?” Amelia nodded and choked.

“And, Martha, that's not the best of it. The highwayman only took me with him, because I asked him to. To get away from Sir Lancelot.”

“You never did, miss!” Amelia nodded again vigorously. Both of them collapsed into hysterical laughter.

“But you mustn't tell, Martha,” Amelia said finally. “Promise me you won't say a word to anyone.”

“I promise, miss. But why don't you want to tell? You're not so fond of Sir Lancelot.”

“Why, if I hold the threat of exposing him over his head, I can prevent him from pursuing me further. And that is a great object, you know.”

Martha at length withdrew, giggling. Amelia lay down on her bed, but although she was quite exhausted from her adventures and had laughed her sides to soreness, she could not help breaking out into giggles again. It was unladylike, she knew, but how could she help herself?

It was, however, in a more sober mode that Amelia received Mr. North the next afternoon. Immediately upon his entrance she was confirmed in the impression she had formed during the previous night, that he was not so easy to impose upon as her aunt Catchlove. She knew she had no wish to betray her highwayman or his friends, but she was not quite so self-assured as to lie throughout a whole interview with a Bow Street runner.

“Good morning, Miss. I hope I find you recovered,” Mr. North said.

“Perfectly so, sir,” Amelia said, and then gave vent to a nervous giggle.

“You understand I don't want to distress you, but it's important we should have as much information as we can get about such desperate ruffians,” Mr. North said. “Now, we have Sir Lancelot's account that there were four, or perhaps more of them, and that after robbing him, they dragged you from the coach. Perhaps you can improve our understanding of last night's occurrences, Miss.” He spoke expressionlessly, but Amelia understood him.

“Do you perhaps doubt Sir Lancelot's account, sir?”

“I think it would be easier if you was to tell me, Miss.” Amelia pondered briefly.

“Mr. North, is it necessary to inform my aunt Catchlove of what I

tell you?” she asked.

“Not unless it's needful to help us catch the rogues,” Mr. North said, still blank faced.

“Because I have my own reasons not to disturb her any further,” Amelia said.

“I'm sure your reasons must be good ones, Miss.”

Amelia relaxed.

“There were not six highwaymen. There was only one,” she said. Mr. North continued expressionless.

“So there was a highwayman after all?” he said politely. Amelia blushed.

“Oh, yes, there was,” she assured him earnestly. Inwardly she reproached herself for naivety. Apparently she might have told him that there were none.

“And did he give any reason for abducting you?”

“He – he didn't precisely abduct me,” Amelia faltered, but Mr. North betrayed no sign of noticing her confusion. “The truth of the matter is, Sir Lancelot was disposed to be gallant and I wished to avoid him, so I – I asked the highwayman to take me with him.”

“That seems a rather rash thing to do,” Mr. North said blandly.

“Oh, indeed, I have already had a scold for my imprudence,” Amelia said.

“From your aunt?”

“No, my aunt does not know of it. From a friend of my highwayman. He took me to – to an inn – I think he had appointed to meet his friend there. The highwayman seemed to think it a

great joke, but the other gentleman was quite severe with me. He said I was lucky to have met with such an honourable fellow, that it might easily have gone otherwise, and that he would take me home."

"A gentleman, this was?"

Unaccountably Amelia blushed again.

"By his manner he was a gentleman, but I conjecture he is not one in his circumstances. His clothes were quite fine, but dirty and creased, as if he had only the one suit."

"Can you describe these two gentlemen?" Mr. North said. Amelia could not help admiring how he kept all irony out of his inflection.

"I – I fear I cannot. I was not thinking of descriptions. All I can tell you is that neither of them was either very tall or very short or very – or anything very out of the common way."

"Would you recognize them again?"

"I cannot swear to it," Amelia said unhappily.

"And what inn was it, where you met with the second gentleman?"

"I am afraid I cannot tell that either," Amelia said. Mr. North waited. "I do not think it was any great distance off the road which Mrs. Catchlove's carriage was taking," she offered doubtfully.

"So then he brought you home. In a carriage, was it?"

"No – no, he took me up before him on his horse."

"And the ruffian was so bold as to parade you through the streets to your aunt's door?"

"I do not think he is a ruffian," Amelia said, somewhat offended. Mr. North still forbore to express any opinion, but Amelia was not

in any doubt what he was thinking.

“I'm sure you don't believe me, sir,” she said. “But that is indeed what happened.”

“I'm sure a young lady such as yourself would have no reason to shield six vicious fellows, if they had existed,” Mr. North said. “But then you should have no more reason to shield two vicious fellows. For all they treated you kindly, Miss, which of course I am glad of, they are felons still, and may go on to terrorize innocent travellers.”

“I'm sorry,” Amelia said.

“Well, if you happen to remember what inn it was, or what these gentlemen looked like, I'm sure you'll tell me,” Mr. North said. Amelia felt his kindly understanding of her reluctance to inform against them was quite sincere. She felt also that he would arrest them and deliver them up to the law without hesitation if he could. She was quite relieved to see the runner depart.

Amelia had no great experience of giving evidence, but she felt reasonably secure that two points of cardinal importance she had carried off successfully – the thieves' snuggery she knew perfectly well was almost the opposite side of London from where Dick Gamble had accosted the coach, and the second at least of the two gentlemen she thought very much out of the common way.

She must in fact be glad she had not found out his name, for it made her safe not to betray it. But she could not avoid being inwardly devoured with curiosity to know who he was. Again and again she went over in her mind what he had said to her at her aunt's door. His claim to have his own house nearby she dismissed as a polite fiction, to avoid her offer of hospitality. But his compliment, his assurance that she had qualities to attract men of parts, she cherished as sincere. She was foolish to do so, for she was not likely ever to see him again. And yet, however often she scolded herself for her foolishness, she could not forgo the pleasure of thinking about him. Nor could she entirely dismiss from her



mind the remembrance of how alarmingly agreeable had been the sensation of leaning up against him as she sat before him on horseback.

## Chapter 14

For two whole days did Mrs. Catchlove scold and threaten Amelia with imminent ruin once her doubtful adventure should become known. Amelia, however, in the sober light of day, stoutly maintained her own assurance of safety. She thought Sir Lancelot she had sufficiently in her power to ensure his silence, and she was certain that no syllable of her little escapade would ever be breathed by her unknown protector. Instead she rallied her forces for a counter-attack.

“Aunt, if you do not betray me, I know not how anyone should find it out. And what should they find out, except that you yourself have behaved most improperly and most unfeelingly towards me, leaving me alone in the coach to face Sir Lancelot's importunities.”

“Pon my soul, you are a monstrous saucy girl!” Mrs. Catchlove said. “I am commissioned after all to get you a husband, and here is Sir Lancelot with money and fashion all on his side. I have done nought save to try what can be done to break down your obstinacy. How am I to face Sir Lancelot and all our set now?”

Amelia was quite unfeeling towards her aunt's predicament. When Sir Lancelot put in an appearance on the third day after his discomfiture, she was barely civil. She remembered that unknown gentleman's words and ceased her labours in the field of coquetry. She made no scenes or protestations. Merely, she spoke to Sir Lancelot and her secondary admirers without flattery, and only barely covered her contempt for them.

There were some few to remark upon her altered behaviour.

“I think perhaps you now are troubled, Miss Loftus,” said

Rotherham, as they found themselves side-by-side at a dinner party one night.

“Not at all, sir,” Amelia said, forcing a smile.

“Come, madam, do me the honour to be frank as you have once before. You have not been very merry tonight.”

Amelia sighed.

“I am no less merry now than before, sir,” she said. “Merely I have given over striving to appear sillier than I am.”

“Then I for one am glad of it, if there be nothing worse than sincerity behind it.”

She laughed at this.

“What of your trouble?” she asked a little later. “Have you had any word of your missing friend?”

“Oh, he has returned. Nothing seems at all amiss with him, save that he is most mysterious as to where he has been and what he has done.” He remained thoughtful, and Amelia's delicacy prompted her to turn to her other neighbour and submit to hear how much he had won at faro.

Rotherham escaped from his mother-in-law in good time to seek out more congenial company. He found the Earl of Creasy amongst others at Brooke's.

“What is it?” the earl said, for Rotherham was staring at him frowningly.

“I was thinking.”

“So I perceive. It seems to cost you dear, sir, for you scowl most dreadfully whenever you do so.”

Rotherham smiled.

“The truth of it is, there's a girl I would like you to meet,” he said. The earl looked dubious. “I am not turning match-maker,” Rotherham assured him. “The young lady is hardly in your league, and wise enough to know it, I think. Only, she is ill-at-ease in the circle her aunt moves in, and I would fain see her get some taste of more congenial company.”

“You flatter me,” the earl said. “What circle is the young lady now condemned to?”

“Mrs. Catchlove's” said Rotherham.

“Mrs. Catchlove is her aunt?” the earl asked.

“Yes. You know of her, I think. A lady with a great taste for the most exquisite fops, and without the imagination to perceive that her niece might have a different predilection. She might easily make a push to widen Miss Loftus' acquaintance to people of more taste and refinement, but she is not like to do so. I – I find I like the girl. I know my wife has invited them for three nights hence. Will you come?”

The earl was looking at him peculiarly.

“I believe I must not, Rotherham,” he said.

“What is there to prevent you?” his friend asked, surprised at the earl's constrained tone, and still more when he suddenly laughed.

“What indeed? Very well, Rotherham, I will come.”

The earl did not linger long, although Mr. Fox and an eager coterie of the young political men were solicitous to know on which side he would speak in the House of Lords on the question of peace with America, and whether he credited the news that Lord Howe had utterly demolished the Spanish and French fleets after relieving Gibraltar.

It was a smaller but equally necessary relief the earl had in contemplation. On reaching home he went immediately to his secretary's room to ask if any farm had been found.

“Yes, my lord, but not in this kingdom. Apparently there is a place vacant in your Irish estates.”

“Ireland? So much the better,” the earl said. “Farthest from here is best, I think. Excellent, Newcombe! But, stay, are you sure there is no worthy fellow being turned out to make way for another?”

“No, my lord. By what McDonnell writes, it is a prosperous farmer, but one advanced in years, who goes to live with a married daughter – he has no sons to carry on.”

“And 'tis not promised to anyone else?”

“No, my lord. McDonnell says the Irish are so inflamed with politics that none of them think of earning a living.”

“It may be that he exaggerates. However, 'tis certain he would not write to you of a vacancy if he could fill it by his own exertions. You may tell him I design to give it to a worthy fellow, whom I will send over without delay, and you may also recommend McDonnell to assist him generously to establish himself. Tomorrow night I will ride out and offer the place to Dick.”

“My lord,” Newcombe said, “would it be a highwayman by any chance that you intend to reward in so gratifying a manner?”

The earl laughed.

“Why, Newcombe, do you think me so careless of my own lands, even in Ireland, as to put them in the keeping of any but an honest reliable farmer?”

“I think you are not so much careless as a little eccentric, my lord.”

“Poor Henry,” said the earl. “It must frequently cost you some pain to obey my commands. I am sorry for it, but I am determined on my course, and cannot alter it.”

“I would not expect you to, my lord,” Newcombe said dryly. “Would you wish me to report on the other matter as well?”

“Miss Loftus? What have you found out?” the earl said.

Mr. Newcombe was somewhat affronted.

“I fail to perceive why I was to inform myself if you knew her name already,” he said.

“Her name I came to learn only this evening, and that by chance. But of her family I still know nothing.”

“She is the daughter of a Yorkshire Squire. I cannot give you a very precise account of her fortune. There seem to be two different stories told. Either she has ten thousand from an uncle, or else she has only the expectation of a thousand pounds by her mother, who yet lives – there are any number of brothers coming before her. I could discover nothing to distinguish the family from a thousand other petty landholders. Her father is not in the Whig interest. Her connection with Mrs. Catchlove you know already. Apparently she is come for one season, 'tis to be presumed upon the usual motive. As for the young lady's character, I could discover nothing. She has made no great impression apparently, for either virtue or the reverse.”

“Thank you, Newcombe. It is as much as I need to know,” the earl said. He smiled at some inner train of thought, but soon became aware that his secretary was regarding him with sober disapproval. “What is it?” he asked.

“I hope you have no inclination to disturb Miss Loftus' peace of mind,” Newcombe said.

There was a flash of anger in the earl's face, but it was soon gone.

“I suppose I deserved that,” he said. “No, Henry, I have not developed any proclivity for molesting young ladies. In fact, I think I am a reformed character, but I do not advise you to place any assurance on it yet. Who can tell what will come of it?” With that he left the room, but not so soon did Newcombe cease to stare after him, with a wild surmise. It was so unprecedented for his lordship to take any notice of young ladies of character, that Newcombe was far more intrigued by the earl's interest than by the puzzle of how he should have become aware of Miss Loftus' existence. He knew it to be a frivolous desire, but he could not entirely suppress a curiosity to see the young lady for himself.

## Chapter 15

At about the same time, in a club of a very different description, Black Billy Thurl was holding court. All evening he sat at his ease in the only solid chair the room could boast, with a bottle of spirits and a glass before him. But in truth the bottle was more for show than for use, for Black Billy was not at leisure but at business. One came in to sell him the fruits of his day's labour, to be offered again to those who had been plucked. Another came to ask as a favour that a certain young rowdy should be rebuked for offering an insult to the petitioner's daughter, but was turned away when he could not pay the price of it. Half a dozen women came fawningly to pay the tithes he insisted upon from them. And so it went all evening. Finally, about two in the morning, two of his principal lieutenants arrived. They were considerably younger and more fashionably dressed than their chief, for Black Billy as a matter of policy kept himself obscure in appearance. The regular hours for transacting public business being over, the bottle was now brought into use, though there was but one glass. The two younger rogues sat upon rickety stools and passed the glass back and forth between them.

“Lads, there's some business I want you to do for me,” Black Billy said. “Can you call to mind that impudent fellow that Dick

Gamble brought to the snuggery?"

"The one who stayed a se'enight, and corrupted all the girls into sitting at their ease? I'm not like to forget him," said Ned.

"Aye," said Peter.

"I want his impudence punished," Black Billy said.

"But he's a gentleman, Billy," said Peter. "We ain't much in the line of bringing the runners down on gentlemen, nor it won't do any good if we do, seeing as how we don't know where the gent's to be found."

"We don't know, but we can find it out," Black Billy said. "There's many a member of our company as saw him at the snuggery, and drank with him, too. Let them go about where the high-lived are to be found. I'll wager someone will soon make him out. Tell them to follow him if they do see him, and find out where he lives. I'll give a shilling to whoever first brings me news of him."

"What'll you do then, Billy? If he's some high-up gent there'll be no use telling the magistrates he's a common prig, for they won't believe it."

Black Billy stared formidably at this objection.

"What I'll do then is my affair," he said.

"Dick Gamble might know where he's to be found," said Peter.

"Dick Gamble might know and not say. Bridle-culls aren't interested in shillings. They won't get out of their beds for less than guineas and gold watches," said Ned. "If I had my way, I'd outlaw the High Toby. It makes prigs vain and above their station. We don't get much good from bridle-culls. They go their own way."

"Dick Gamble is one who won't for long," said Black Billy. "He's

caught the trick of impudence from his fine friend. I'll have him given up to the runners tomorrow."

"Coo, guv, you'll never set the runners on him at Meg and Simon's snuggery!" cried Peter. Black Billy laughed.

"I still have a use for the snuggery," he said. "No, I know he'll be in town tomorrow. I had the whole story of his plans from Sulky. Dick's to buy his wife a silk gown, 'strooth. I'll set the runners on him in the street in full day."

Black Billy's aides were as loud in their admiration for his subtle strategy as any other general's could be, but Thurl was not much moved by flattery. He dismissed them to carry out his orders while the bottle was yet half full.

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Amelia was sitting quietly at work the next morning by the time her aunt came to breakfast.

"I declare, Amelia, you are a strange girl. What should you be at your needle for, with a house full of maids to work for you? 'Twould make a very odd appearance if any of our friends should call and see you working."

"Why, aunt, how can that be? I have nothing else to do until we go out at noon. There is nothing unladylike in holding a needle, surely."

"If you would but condescend to use a little powder and paint, you might have been two hours longer at your toilette, and not found time hanging on your hands. But you are always dressed in as little time as can be, and never even change your mind what dress you will wear. I declare you are positively unnatural, Amelia."

Amelia only laughed at her aunt's complaint. She was willing enough to have her general unfashionableness reverted to, for she was weary of her aunt's harangues on the lovelorn Sir Lancelot.



They were not destined to canvass either subject, however, for from the breakfast room they could clearly hear the ringing of the door bell.

“La, someone is come, and so early. Put away your work, Amelia. Who can it be at such an hour?”

Amelia had only time to hope it was not Sir Lancelot, and to think fleetingly and irrelevantly of another gentleman, before the servant announced Miss Smythe.

Amelia flew to embrace her.

“Oh, my dear Miss Smythe, how delightful!” was all she could say for some time. Mrs. Catchlove, although Miss Smythe was perfectly unknown to her, was perfectly willing also to hope that Miss Smythe would take a dish of tea, and honour the house with her presence throughout her stay in London.

“I do not know if you might not be heartily sick of me before I leave,” Miss Smythe said.

“Oh, Miss Smythe, how is it you are here? I never permitted myself to hope you would visit me,” Amelia said.

“Well, my dear, I have had my notice, and so I could not stay in Loftus Manor.”

“Oh, no,” said Amelia. “How dare papa be so mean! Oh, Miss Smythe, I am so sorry! What shall you do?”

“I shall have to look out for another position,” Miss Smythe said. “Fortunately, I have still some friends in London who may be able to assist me.”

“Oh, it is iniquitous!” Amelia said. “This is Squire's way of revenging himself for being forced to give way on my coming to London, I suppose. Oh, Miss Smythe, I had rather have stayed at

home than see you cast off so!”

“No, Amelia, you must speak with more moderation,” Miss Smythe said. “It was my office to be your governess, not your pensioner for life.”

“Faith,” Mrs. Catchlove said, “I’m sure I should resent it more than you do, Miss Smythe, not to feel myself lacking in spirit.”

“Since neither spirit nor resentment will do anything to find me a place I will leave them until I have leisure to indulge myself,” Miss Smythe said. “But I must try what I can to do my business first. Indeed, I should already have been to solicit some kind friend, only I could not resist having a peep at my dear Amelia.”

“Sure, I’d have been monstrous angry if you had not come to us first,” Mrs. Catchlove said. Miss Smythe, you must not think of business, but stop with us a month at least. Lord, we can divert ourselves so prettily! And I am sure after so long in Yorkshire you deserve some pleasuring.”

As Amelia's protestations were added to her aunt's, Miss Smythe at length gave way, and allowed a fortnight for dissipation. Mrs. Catchlove then went bustling to ensure that the full force of her hospitality should be directed upon this new visitor, leaving Amelia and Miss Smythe to themselves.

“Well, my dear, I hope you have been having an agreeable time,” Miss Smythe said. Amelia pouted.

“Oh, Miss Smythe, I am well enough, but I must own I have been disappointed. Not that my aunt has been anything but kindness itself,” Amelia went on hastily. “Were it only for her ready hospitality to you, I must love her. But she thinks nothing of importance but dress, and scolds me regularly for not painting my face. And then she knows no wits, or literary men, or even anybody of much common sense except Mr. Rotherham. And she so wishes me to marry Sir Lancelot Scoby, she has been quite as unreasonable as papa about Mr. Arkwright. I could not possibly

marry Sir Lancelot.”

Miss Smythe laughed at this catalogue of woe.

“Well, my dear, if you can but continue to receive offers at the rate of one a month, it is very likely you will eventually hit upon a more agreeable suitor,” she said.

Amelia had not thought of her predicament in this light, and was brought to laugh too.

“Oh, Miss Smythe, how glad I am you have come! I am sure my aunt and I shall deal delightfully now you are here, if you will but support me on the question of Sir Lancelot.”

“Well, my dear, from your letters I should think him most ineligible as a husband for you, but I shall reserve my judgement,” Miss Smythe said. She was in truth almost as delighted to be in London as Amelia could be to see her there. Miss Smythe was in hopes of being able to introduce Amelia into the more literary circles wherein she had still preserved some correspondents, but she was unwilling to promise anything until she had proven that the professions of friendship in the letters she received were true coin and not counterfeit. In the meantime her mind was not so elevated as to disdain the description of parties and theatres and little matters of dress which Amelia had told in her letters and was now willing to amplify in person.

Mrs. Catchlove was soon with them again.

“La, Amelia, it is quite one o'clock and we were to be at our shopping by noon. Miss Smythe, you must come with us. To be sure you are not so odd in your dress as Amelia was when she first came, but we must refurbish you a trifle as well. Come, ladies!”

The two ladies thus exhorted were quite willing to obey, and within a few minutes were being carried to extend their collection of silks.

They visited several shops without hitting upon anything to satisfy

Mrs. Catchlove's nice discernment, and were just about to step from the pavement to cross to another warehouse when Amelia caught sight of Dick Gamble not three yards off. She froze where she stood, turning so red that Miss Smythe and Mrs. Catchlove could not fail to notice her agitation.

“Why, Amelia, what is it?” Mrs. Catchlove said.

At almost the same instant Dick saw Amelia. He looked a little disconcerted, but swept off his hat and made her a flourishing bow. Amelia's two companions, following the direction of her gaze, were in time to see this obeisance.

Amelia was just starting towards him when she perceived Mr. North, in company with two other men, coming sedately up behind him. She was unable to conceal a look of alarm. Dick, seeing her confusion, thought she wished to avoid him, and humbly stepped backwards directly into the runners' arms.

Mr. North said something to the highwayman, but so low Amelia could not hear it. Dick Gamble showed no great emotion, but shrugged, glanced at Amelia, and submitted quietly to go with Mr. North and his two associates.

A smothered cry issued from Amelia without her knowledge. She took a step towards him.

Mr. North in his turn looked at her, seeming quite unsurprised.

“Would this be one of the gentlemen you couldn't describe, miss?” he asked affably.

“No!” Amelia said. “I never saw him before in my life! If you are arresting him, you have the wrong man, I assure you.”

“Well, it's of no consequence, miss, since we have evidence of other crimes against this man,” Mr. North said. “I am sorry you ladies should be distressed by such a sight. Your servant, Mrs. Catchlove.” He bowed and carried his prisoner away.

“La!” said Mrs. Catchlove. “Sure, if I hadn't known Mr. North, I'd never even have noticed it was three Bow Street runners arresting a criminal, so quiet and gentlemanly as they all were.”

“Amelia, who was that man?” Miss Smythe asked.

Amelia was still standing stock-still, gazing after the officers and the highwayman.

“Oh, I'm sure I don't know, Miss Smythe,” she said.

“But he saluted you,” Miss Smythe said. “And surely you recognized him. We both saw you recognizing him.”

“Oh, no, you are mistaken,” Amelia protested.

“Amelia,” Mrs. Catchlove said, “I declare I think that was one of the highwaymen who waylaid you.”

“Oh, no, aunt, I assure you I never saw him before in my life.”

Miss Smythe looked sharply at her, but said only,

“Well, we had better be about our business. Mrs. Catchlove, I still protest against primrose. It would do very well for Amelia, but at my age, and with my complexion I fear it would only make me look bilious.” This remark was sufficient to deflect Mrs. Catchlove's attention into deeper cut channels. The two older ladies maintained a running debate upon all the shades and hues in turn. Amelia followed them in docile silence, her mind still so much intent upon the horror of Dick Gamble's arrest that Mrs. Catchlove must have remarked her agitation if Miss Smythe had not deliberately kept her hostess fully engaged.

When they at length reached home, Amelia fled to her room, but Miss Smythe followed her directly.

“Amelia, what is all this business about being waylaid by

highwaymen? And who was that man?"

Amelia looked at her governess and dissolved into tears. It was some time before she could speak, but bit by bit she acquainted the astounded Miss Smythe with her adventure on the road.

"Oh, Miss Smythe, it was Dick Gamble we saw taken by the runners today! What can I do? Oh, I must save him somehow!"

"You cannot, Amelia. You may relieve his present wants while he is in prison awaiting trial, but you cannot prevent the law being upheld. By your own account he is a highwayman. If he is not brought to trial for robbing Sir Lancelot and you, he must have been taken for some other crime."

"But, Miss Smythe, I owe him such an obligation! And the other gentleman may be in danger too. If I could but warn him!"

"Since you know neither his name nor his domicile you cannot do that either. Calm yourself, Amelia. This agitation will avail you nothing. Indeed it must be the consequence of your thoughtless behaviour in throwing yourself into the company of criminals. If you had not, you would not be so affected at seeing him arrested."

"Oh, Miss Smythe, it is not my distress I deplore, but his! How can you be so unfeeling?"

Miss Smythe grimaced.

"Amelia, I am sincerely sorry that a person who has done you a service should be miserable, but truly you cannot pluck him out of prison. If you like we shall find some charitable gentleman to visit him, and send him money for his present wants."

"Oh, yes. At least let us do that," Amelia said, jumping to her feet eagerly.

"Let me enquire of Mrs. Catchlove where such a benevolent gentleman may be found," Miss Smythe said. "She is better placed

than you are to discover him.”

Miss Smythe went in search of her hostess. Amelia sank down on the floor, her head on the chair her governess had vacated.

“I must warn him somehow!” she said.

Amelia was engaged to attend her aunt to a private concert that evening, but she remained so distressed and alarmed that her plea of a headache was readily admitted, and Miss Smythe convinced to go in her stead.

“I shall be much the better for lying on my bed in the dark,” Amelia said faintly. “So you shall go, Miss Smythe. It is only a headache after all. You need not be alarmed for me, and I would rather think of you having some pleasure. I know how you love music.”

“You promise you will lie down upon your bed directly?” Miss Smythe said.

“Oh, yes,” Amelia said.

Her aunt and governess were no sooner in the carriage than Amelia sat up abruptly in bed and rang the bell.

“Martha,” she said when her handmaiden presented herself, “you must slip out into the street, and run to the nearest livery stable and hire me a horse for the night.”

Martha opened her eyes very wide and gasped,

“You're never running away, Miss Amelia!”

“Oh, no,no,” Amelia said hurriedly. “But I must go to the inn. Maybe they can get a message to Dick's friend. I shall go and come back again in good time to be in my bed before my aunt returns, I assure you. Only you must take care not to be seen when you go out and when you come back.”

“But, miss, what will you wear? You have not got your riding clothes with you.”

“Oh, what does that signify? I will wear the first thing that comes to hand. But stay, that is a very good notion. Martha, I shall wear your dress! We are quite of a size after all.”

Martha became positively goggle-eyed. She stood staring at her mistress. Amelia slipped out of bed.

“Martha, if you love me, you will do as I ask. I must try at least to get some aid for Dick Gamble and I must warn his friend. It would weigh on my conscience all my life if I lay at ease in my bed tonight.”

Martha was not proof against a double appeal to conscience and affection. She ran to bring her mistress own of her own dresses and to array her in it.

“Oh, miss, you do look a proper lady's maid,” she said.

Within twenty minutes Martha had faithfully executed her commission, and had returned back into the house. Mistress and maid slipped into the street, and Martha conducted the resolute Amelia to the stable where a horse stood saddled. The ostler put her up with as little display of curiosity as any man well could to see a young lady sit scandalously astride a horse and ride away alone in the middle of the night. She retraced as well as she could the route she had taken with her mysterious protector. She was not certain of the location of the inn and she spent an anxious twenty minutes casting about in the dark after passing the last landmark she could remember, but she found the snuggery at last, consigned her horse to the lame ostler, and rapped boldly at the door.



## Chapter 16

The earl declined several invitations that evening to dine quietly at home with no other company than his secretary.

“You will not object to being left to your books this evening, I know,” the earl said.

“My lord, do you really intend to go back amongst thieves and rascals to see this highwayman of yours?”

The earl laughed.

“Certainly I do,” he said. “Such gentlemen do not reveal their abodes. It is the only place I can go to find my highwayman. Come, Henry, bear up! If I passed a se'enight amongst them without being offered any hurt, I may drop in unannounced for an evening in equal security. I do not intend to make a habit of it, I assure you.”

“A wild freak is one thing, my lord. A cool determination to consort with criminals is quite another.”

“Charity, Henry,” said the earl. “I go not for my own entertainment but to snatch a good fellow from the shadow of the gibbet. You cannot oppose such an estimable action, surely.”

“I think you still go for your own entertainment, my lord.”

His lordship looked displeased for a moment, but finally said,

“That need not cancel out my aim, at any rate.”

Newcombe observed him gravely.

“No, my lord, you are right. It is a charitable aim. God forbid I should reproach you for taking pleasure in it.”

The earl grimaced.

“Do not let Dick Gamble hear you speak so, I beseech you. He has his own pride, and I do not think I could prevail on him to accept of my offer except on business-like terms. I would not stir in the matter if I was not very much in need of a farmer.”

Having dined and taken a glass of port at his leisure, the earl was sauntering upstairs to change his evening dress for riding clothes when his notice was attracted by a contretemps at his front door.

“I must see him!” said a voice he thought he knew.

“His lordship cannot have any need to deal with persons of your order,” Ives was saying, as the earl strolled down stairs again.

“Now be off with you, before I summon the watch.” The butler moved to close the door, but the importunate person darted into the narrowing aperture, squalling,

“I must see the gentleman!”

“You may admit Mistress Kelly, Ives,” the earl said. The butler looked thunderstruck, but stood silently aside. Nell Kelly came dashing into the front hall.

“Oh, Mr. Warwick, dear, it's glad I am to see you,” she said.

“No more than I am to see you, Nell,” said the earl, gallantly suppressing all sign of the hilarity he felt at the sight of the butler's outraged face. “Pray step into the dining room. May I offer you a glass? Ives, some brandy for Mistress Kelly.”

Nell allowed herself to be shepherded into the dining room. Newcombe, lingering over his port, looked up in alarm.

“Coo, guv,” she said, looking about her at the damask hangings

and the portraits of the earl's ancestors staring dourly down. "Is this really your house? La, you are a high-up gent after all."

"It is indeed my house," the earl said, the corners of his mouth twitching. "I did not expect the honour of seeing you in it. May I present Mr. Newcombe. Henry, this is Nell Kelly."

Newcombe stood goggling. Nell swept him a curtsy.

"I wouldn't have come in on you, Mr. Warwick, if it was for myself," Nell said. "You've been right proper to me, you have, and I wouldn't go for embarrassing you in front of your highlife friends on my own account."

"To what do I owe this pleasure, then?" asked the earl, bringing forward a chair for her to sit on. Nell, however, stood upright, clutching at his sleeve.

"It's Black Billy. He's after to do you a mischief, sir. He's set the whole gang on to looking for you, to find out where you live. I don't know but someone else might already have followed you home and peached to him."

The earl stood silently considering.

"Oh, he's a bad man to have against you, Mr. Warwick," Nell said. "He's like to set some of the lads on to cut your throat."

"I do not think he will," the earl said. "But I am much obliged to you, Mistress Nell, for the warning. Did you follow me through the streets, then?" She nodded. The earl smiled ruefully. "I never saw you," he said. "I see I must be more on my guard."

"My lord," Newcombe said. "You will not go out alone after this?"

"I must, Henry," the earl said. "I will not spend the rest of my life cowering within doors."

Ives came in, bearing a bottle and a glass on a silver platter. Only by the extreme dignity of his pace did he betray his profound disapproval. The earl took the tray from him and dismissed him by a look. He poured out a glass and presented it to Nell.

“You will take care, Mr. Warwick,” she said.

“I will, Nell, have no fear. But what of you? You have risked a good deal to warn me, I think. What if one of the gang saw you loitering outside this house? You must have been out there above two hours if you followed me home and never knocked on the door 'til now.”

“I thought maybe you were just visiting, like,” Nell confided. “I never thought you'd have such a fine house.” She took a gulp of brandy. “Coo!” she said, as she tasted it.

“You had better stay here, Nell,” the earl said. “If it's found out that you've come to warn me, it will go hard with you, I know. You will be safe here, until I can find some place in the country for you to go to.”

Nell screwed up her face in combined hope and fear.

“Oh, no, sir,” she said at length. “If I don't go back, Black Billy will know for sure that something's amiss. There's no place you could send me where he wouldn't find me. No, 'tis kind in you, Mr. Warwick, but I'd better go back. Besides it wouldn't be fitting. I'm sure your lady wife wouldn't take kindly to me.”

“I have no wife,” he said absently.

“La! A fine rich cove like you without a wife! Sure, I'd think all the fine ladies would break their hearts for you,” Nell said.

“No wife,” the earl reiterated. “There's only Henry here, and I'm sure he'd be delighted to acknowledge the service you have rendered me.”

An alarmed look came over Newcombe's face, but he choked down any comment.

"No, thank ye kindly, Mr. Warwick, but I'd best go," Nell said. "And the sooner the safer." She gulped down the rest of the brandy and prepared to depart. The earl accompanied her back into the front hall.

"Wait," he said. "Where can I find Black Billy other than the snuggery?"

"At the Hammer and Sail by the docks," Nell said. "But you don't want to go there. It ain't safe."

"No, I will not if I can avoid it," the earl said. "But, Nell, come to me at any time if I can be of assistance to you. You will be always welcome."

Nell blushed deeply. She made a confused curtsy and fled the house. The earl returned into the dining room.

"My lord, will you not lay an information against this Black Billy?" Newcombe said.

"I will not," the earl retorted. "I gave my word on the first evening that I would not bring the law down on any of them, and I will not break it for a private quarrel."

"A private quarrel! My lord, this is not some harsh words between gentlemen at a card table!"

"No, it is not, Henry, but I will keep my word for all that. I will have my wits about me, you may be sure, but I will find some way to frustrate this rogue without betraying my friends." He considered. "I must go."

"My lord, surely not, after such a warning. It is walking into the lion's den."

“Oh, I think the snuggery is still safe. Black Billy would not be tracking me in London, if he expected to find me there.”

“But at least do not go alone. Let me come with you.” The earl laughed gently.

“Henry, I would not implicate you for such a trifle. And, to speak the truth, I don't wish to be responsible for your safety as well as my own. No, I will go alone. It will be safer than bursting in with an armed retinue, believe me. Courage, Henry! You will see me again in the morning, safe and sound.” The earl went to pursue his interrupted adventure.

## Chapter 17

“La, I never thought to see you again, miss,” Meg said as Amelia came into the room. “Whatever are you doing here?”

Amelia crossed to the bar, and said in a low urgent voice,

“The gentleman who escorted me home that night, do you remember him?”

“Mr. Warwick? Sure, I'm not like to forget him,” Meg said.

“Mr. Warwick! Is he here?” Amelia asked.

“Why no, he's gone, miss. He hasn't been here since that night when he took you away,” said Meg. “Nor I don't look to see him again, neither. He ain't properly one of us, miss. He has his own friends, no doubt.”

“But I must find him,” Amelia said, looking as much distressed as if she had received a blow to the stomach.

“Maybe Dick Gamble can tell you where he is to be found. I'm

sure Dick will be in tonight some time,” Meg said.

“Oh, no! That is what I came to tell him. Dick Gamble was arrested by the Bow Street runners today.”

Meg stared at Amelia.

“It's never so!” she cried.

“It is,” said Amelia. “I saw him taken. I thought at least to warn Mr. Warwick, for I can do nothing more. Oh, how can I find him?” She sank down into a chair.

“Dick taken! Well-a-day, it's sorry I am to hear that. He'll be nubbed for sure. Poor Dick!” Meg lamented. Simon shook his head sorrowfully. Another signal came on the door, and he went to open, still sighing lugubriously.

The earl came in smiling. He caught sight of Amelia and his look changed to astonishment.

“I thought you might have learned more prudence, madam,” he said, striding up to her. Amelia looked up, jumped to her feet and cried out,

“Oh, sir! Mr. Warwick! Oh, I thank God *you* are yet safe.” That these were not mere words of course was proven when she clasped her hands and raised her eyes in apparently genuine thanksgiving. The earl's exasperation at finding her there was interrupted by a sudden upsurge of some other kind of feeling. He was not used to being the object of that form of maiden's prayer. She did not give him long to consider of just what feeling it was, however, but continued urgently, “I came on purpose to find you. Dick Gamble has been arrested.”

A low growl escaped him. He seized her arm.

“Are you sure of this?” he demanded.

“Yes, I saw the runners take him away,” she said.

“Damn,” said the earl, letting her go abruptly. “Damn him for a clumsy fool! And damn me for an idle one! I should have come one day sooner.”

“Oh, sir, can you do anything to save him?” Amelia asked. The earl pondered, frowning.

“I might intercede,” he said, “if he is condemned. But I am not certain how far my interest will go. I have not many friends on the government side.”

“I never thought you did,” Amelia said. The earl felt a fleeting amusement at how she mistook his meaning, but suppressed it.

“You should not be here,” he said.

“But I had to come! I could not go giddily about to balls and concerts while a man to whom I have obligations was languishing in prison and while – while *you* might be in danger.”

“Me?” he said absently.

“If the runners have information against Dick, they might know of you also. You are his friend.”

“Oh, I am in no danger,” the earl said, with grim humour.

“But we must do something for Dick,” she said.

“I will seek him out tomorrow,” the earl said. “I never thought to be in Newgate, but better this way than the other.”

“Are you sure it is safe for you? Miss Smythe has already asked after some gentleman to visit him.”

“Miss Smythe?”



“My governess, who is come to London today.”

“Your governess must have as peculiar notions of propriety as your aunt, to let you run into thieves' dens alone in the middle of the night,” said the earl.

“No, indeed, sir. They both think me laid down upon my bed. I will not hear any such implications made about Miss Smythe. She is a most excellent woman.”

“She seems not to have been entirely excellent as a governess, if your behaviour is her testimonial.”

“Oh, never mind my behaviour! It is not me, but Dick you should be thinking of. Can we do nothing but visit him?”

“I can set lawyers upon his case, I suppose. I wish I knew what information has been laid against him. If I knew his accusers I might contrive they should withdraw – well, I will see poor Dick and learn what he can tell me of his degree of danger. In the meantime I suppose I must escort you home again.”

Amelia blushed.

“It is not necessary, sir. I have my own horse to ride tonight.”

“It is indeed necessary, even if you rode three horses at once. Come, madam, let us not be lingering here.”

Amelia suffered herself to be led out.

“At all events, I hope you are glad to have my information,” she said.

“I am glad of it,” the earl said. “But I should be glad also if this were the last of your wild escapades.”

“But I want to know what comes of your visit to Dick Gamble,” Amelia said. “May I not perhaps visit him too?”

“No, madam, you may not! I will write to you at your aunt's house, and let you know what is the case against him, and what I am doing to extract him – but only on your promise never to come here again.”

“But what if I need to send to you?” Amelia asked. The earl frowned at her and then laughed.

“You may send to John Warwick, at the Crown and Anchor. Will that satisfy you, madam?”

“Oh, yes, indeed. I thank you, sir,” she said.

“And will you promise me to avoid this snuggerly from now on?”

“I promise,” she said with dignity. “If you had given me your direction before, I should not have had to come here seeking you.”

The earl laughed again. He raised his eyebrows to see her horse fitted with an ordinary saddle, but he put her up in it without comment and mounted his own horse. Amelia, however, eyed his mount with frank interest.

“You have not the same horse as last time,” she said.

“No – no, that last was borrowed, I had not intended a journey on horseback on that occasion.”

“That one was a good serviceable beast, better than good, but I must say, this one is – how came you by such a magnificent animal?”

The earl stroked his horse's neck.

“Yes, he is a fine fellow, is he not? I came by him honestly, madam, my father was well known in his day for a horse breeder. Castor here is of the fifth generation of his line to serve my family, and the most illustrious of them all. I would not part with him for

any consideration, and I hope in the fullness of time his sons will serve my sons. But how came you by your knowledge of horseflesh? I am used to hear remarks from men, but not so often from ladies.”

“I have four brothers,” she said. “I must have something to say of horses if I was ever in my life to have even a single conversation with any of them. They are all illiterate louts together, but my second brother Jonas is a good-natured lout, and taught me to ride, even against my father's express command. Only, I had to learn to ride like a boy, because we could not contrive to get any lady's saddle without my father's knowledge. He was most furious when he discovered it, but I must say tonight I am glad of it.”

The earl refrained from remarking that he also was glad of it. He struggled a little to keep his mind upon the ingenuousness of her conversation, rather than to be carried far afield by the curiously engrossing sight of a lady who did not sit demurely side-saddle with a long train draped over her.

After a pause, she asked,

“And how many sons have you?”

“Sons?” he said, puzzled by this non sequitur.

“You spoke of Castor's sons serving your sons.” He laughed.

“I have none as yet, but then no more has he – unless he has been engaging in adventures without my knowledge, which I hope he has not. I suppose when I marry it will be time enough for him to begin to think of sons as well.”

“Oh! Well, I – I wish you and your lady well,” she said.

“I have no lady in mind as yet,” he said.

“Then I would strongly advise you do not keep Castor waiting on the event,” she said. “When you have such a superior animal

already in hand, you should not delay to contribute to the breed, only on the chance of finding an equally suitable lady. Who knows how long that might take? You may never find a lady as - well, at any rate, he is a very handsome beast.”

“Perhaps I shall take your advice, Miss Loftus,” he said.

“How do you know my name?” she asked.

“I enquired,” he said. “I hope you are not offended. But when I meet with a young lady of such extremely independent demeanour, I confess to a little curiosity.”

“You are a gentleman after all, then,” she said.

“I beg your pardon?” the earl said, more than a little taken aback.

“Oh, I knew you were a gentleman! But I told the Bow Street runner that my aunt called in, when I did not return with Sir Lancelot that night, that I thought you were a gentleman in your manner, but not your circumstances. But if you are in a position to find out my name, and are not being sought by the runners, I suppose you are a gentleman in your circumstances as well. In which case, it is probably improper in you as well as me to go to thieves' dens.”

He gave a shout of laughter at this.

“Well, madam, if you have informed against me, the Runners may in fact be after me,” he said.

“I did not inform against you,” she said. “I had to tell Mr. North a little, for Sir Lancelot had told the most shocking tales, how there had been six highwaymen, whom he fought against most desperately, and how they abducted me. Only it was plain that Mr. North did not at all believe Sir Lancelot, so I had to tell him something, and I did not feel equal to concocting a lie from beginning to end. But I was most careful to say nothing that would at all help them to find you, or Dick either.”

“So has Sir Lancelot slunk away discomfited?” the earl asked. It was Amelia's turn to laugh.

“Not quite. My aunt still believes in his heroic deeds, and still urges his suit. But I let him know I would betray his dissembling if he persisted in annoying me. Now he does not know how to come near me or how to keep away from my aunt. I could almost pity him.”

“Why did you not simply confide in your aunt at once?”

“I think I am better protected by having a weapon to hold him at bay than by using it and losing the effect of it. For I could not be sure my aunt would not still favour him.”

“Are you always so ruthless?” he asked, well entertained. Amelia considered the question seriously.

“I don't think so,” she said. “Only it is not pleasant to be pressed to marry a fool. I am afraid you have got a distorted view of my character.”

“Oh, no, Miss Loftus,” the earl said. “I think I understand you quite well.”

## **Chapter 18**

The earl presented himself at Newgate as early the next day as he could gain admission. Considerations of discretion had caused him to wear a plain country suit of clothes of a sober brown, without gold buttons or lace, and only a plain bag wig. Thus he caused no sensation when he entered the yard.

He saw a dismal enough scene. A great crowd of prisoners made the noise as overpowering as the smell. Men and women mingled

promiscuously, strolling or sitting. Here and there was a prisoner decently arrayed, but the greater number were in rags as filthy as their habitation. Early as it was, many were drunk and shrieked and sang with a desperate gaiety. Those poor wretches with neither money nor friends could be detected by their haggardness, for the basic allowance for feeding prisoners was insufficient to keep much flesh on their bones. Some were lying amid the filth, too weak in the extremity of want or despair to attend to their surroundings.

The earl stood appalled for a moment. He had thought he had touched bottom in his stay at the thieves' snugery, but he now perceived he had been deluding himself.

At length he saw his friend, sitting against a wall and seemingly lost in reverie. The earl went to him.

"Dick," he said. Dick Gamble looked up apathetically.

"Warwick! I never thought to see you here."

"I am very sorry to see you here," the earl replied.

"It's no surprise," Dick said. "I never thought to escape it in the end."

"How did you come to be so careless, Dick?"

"That I can't tell you. Some cove was ready at the magistrate's to swear I had robbed him of his watch and his purse. I could not recollect him – but then I seldom see such folk by daylight."

"But how is it the runners knew where you were to be found?"

"Billy's gang," said Dick. "They came up to me in the street, two runners and Ned Quarrel. It's Ned pointed me out to them, I make no doubt, but how he came to know what street I should be on is more than I can say. Black Billy must have set the gang on to find me."

“Lord, why didn't you turn evidence on this Ned Quarrel, then?”

“What good would it do me? They had the cove there, ready to take his oath I was the one had robbed him. I won't be any the less nubbed if Ned was here to keep me company. I'd as lief be without him.”

“Who was this fellow who spoke against you?”

“Faith, I don't know. I wasn't listening.”

All this time Dick had remained slouched against the wall in an attitude that plainly bespoke his hopelessness. Despite his pity, the earl was moved to irritation.

“Bear up, man! You aren't hanged yet.”

“No, but I will be,” Dick said. “I can bring no evidence I didn't pluck that fellow.”

“But, Dick, don't you see he must have been brought to accuse you by Black Billy? How else should he have been there? By your own account it was not he who recognized you in the street.”

“It makes no never mind,” Dick said.

“But if I can find him, I can perhaps discover how he is connected with Black Billy. For all we know his evidence is perjured,” the earl said. “What magistrate was it you were brought before?”

“I don't know that either. I never paid no heed to his name.”

“Dick, have you been drinking?”

This sharp enquiry elicited a dreary laugh from the highwayman.

“I've neither eat nor drink today,” he said. “Nor slept much in the night. I'm not used to lie with twenty others in a midden.”

“Have you no money to procure yourself at least a room and a bed?” said the earl.

“Oh, aye, I still have my purse. But whatever I have is for Molly and my boys. Why should I spend it on my comfort? Wet or dry, hungry or full, I'll come to be nubbed soon enough.”

“Not if I can prevent it,” the earl asserted. “Have you sent word to your wife?”

“No, Molly knows nought yet. She doesn't expect me for a se'enight, and why should she sorrow sooner than she needs to?”

“Tell me where I may find her, and I will take her whatever you wish to send,” the earl said. “And I will pay for a private cell for you, at least.”

“Oh, no, Warwick, I wouldn't take your money,” Dick protested. The earl laughed.

“You were willing enough to do so at the commencement of our acquaintance. Why should you be prouder now?” he asked.

This sally finally shook Dick Gamble from his lethargy.

“Faith, why indeed? Thank you, Mr. Warwick. 'Tis very kind in you to come to me.” He sat up and looked around. “I saw your young lady at the very moment I was taken,” he confided in a lower tone. “At first I thought it was she had betrayed me, but I could see she was fair cut up about it. And then I recognized Ned, of course.”

“I know,” said the earl. “It was she who told me of your arrest and bid me aid you.”

“Did she? That was friendly in her, I'm sure,” said Dick. “'Tis a very nice, saucy mort she is.”



“Yes, she is,” the earl said. “Well, Dick, tell me where your Molly is to be found and I’ll carry word to her. And I’ll do what I can to extract you from this scrape, I promise you.”

The earl stayed only long enough to be assured that Dick Gamble indeed had money enough for present needs. He then sought out the warden and bestowed upon him such benefits as would ensure a private room for the highwayman, the temporary removal of his chains, and whatever else of good food and decent treatment could be purchased in that gloomy place. For an additional consideration the warden was also prepared to furnish the name of the magistrate who had committed Dick to stand trial.

The earl then sought out the magistrate, and discovered the name and direction of the witness who had given evidence against Dick. He went to interview Mr. Anthony Beresford of Bristol, currently residing at The Tabard Inn in Southwark.

Mr. Beresford turned out to be a portly merchant of some fifty summers, flushed and ecstatic to be waited on by an earl.

“Your lordship, this is an honour! Bless my soul, I don’t know what to say,” Mr. Beresford said, bowing repeatedly. “How may I serve your lordship?”

“It is justice I ask you to serve, not me, sir. I am given to understand that you have given evidence against one Dick Gamble that he robbed you on the highway, sir.”

Mr. Beresford became yet redder in the face. Indignation seemed to puff out his cheeks and raise him higher in his boots.

“That I did, my lord, and it will give me great pleasure to see the scoundrel hanged.”

“Sir, I have come to ask you whether you might not have been mistaken. This man Gamble is known to me sir,” the earl said at his most urbane. “I know him for a fine fellow, with many honest qualities. In fact, I destined him for a tenant of mine, which I hope

is witness enough to my esteem for him. Are you in fact certain he is the man who robbed you?"

"My lord, I could not forget the rascal!"

"But was it not dark when you were robbed? And surely it is the custom for highwaymen to cover their faces." Mr. Beresford looked yet more agitated.

"Damme, the fellow robbed me and must hang for it. I respect the law, my lord. I am not like to forget him. I told him I should recognize him again. He took my watch, after all. This very watch." Mr. Beresford pulled the time piece from his waistcoat pocket and laid it proudly on the table. The earl took the watch in his hand and examined it. It was a fine mechanism in a massy gold case, and as he expected, he saw Mr. Beresford's name engraved on the back.

"How is it, sir, that you come to have it once more in your possession, if Dick Gamble robbed you of it?" the earl enquired mildly.

An alarming change came over Mr. Beresford's face. He puffed and rocked on his feet, but said nothing.

"I think perhaps that you were approached by a criminal who handles stolen property and offered your watch back again for a consideration," the earl said. "He knew you by your name engraved on the back of the watch, and enquired for you at all the principal inns. And rather than seize him and call for the proper authorities, you quietly paid for the restoration of your property. Then this same rascal, or one of his confederates, later called upon you to be prepared to swear that Dick Gamble was the man. Once again you did not seize upon this suspicious character, and denounce him, but fell in quietly with his scheme to ruin poor Dick. Your respect for the law, sir, does not seem entirely consistent."

"Perhaps, my lord, you might furnish me with some proof you are

who you say you are?" was Mr. Beresford's unexpected response. The earl laughed.

"I am indeed the Earl of Creasy," he said. "I am known in the coffee room of this house, in fact. You may inquire with my good will."

"You must pardon my doubt, my lord, when you seem to know all about the doings of certain criminals," Mr. Beresford said, not quite able to hide his complaisant admiration of his own cunning. "How do I know you are not some confederate of that rascal, come to trick me?"

The earl laughed again, yet more heartily.

"Mr. Beresford, I invite you to make whatever enquiries you will to satisfy you of my bona fides. And having done so, I am sure you will readily perceive that I can have no object in this business but to save a man from the gallows who does not deserve such a fate, and to save you from the embarrassment of having your evidence refuted in court."

Mr. Beresford had seemed to waver while the earl spoke. But before the last words were out of his mouth, the earl had realized they were ill-judged. Mr. Beresford was restored to all his original bluster.

"Do you doubt my word, my lord?" he roared. "The rascal I accused is the rascal who robbed me. You may threaten, my lord, but I will say so. Do not think to shake me with suppositions, or intimidate me with titles. I will have justice, my lord."

The earl took his leave, vexed but certain it was useless to remonstrate further. He caused something of a furor at his solicitor's office by appearing in person, unannounced, and commanding that that worthy individual should retain the best possible counsel in defence of a common highwayman, money no object. Having completed this business, the earl was at a stand. He went to the Crown and Anchor to write his report to Amelia,

and it was something of a struggle to know in what words to clothe his misgivings for Dick Gamble's fate. He held a sufficiently high opinion of the perspicacity of judges to know that doubts of some scheme by one set of thieves to betray another would not deflect the court from the central issue, which was that a solid citizen had been robbed of his property, and Dick was the man who stood accused.

## **Chapter 19**

Amelia was in such a state of mind all morning that Miss Smythe demanded sharply to know if she was ill.

“Oh, no, Miss Smythe, I am quite well. I am only restless.” Since her restlessness was perfectly apparent, Miss Smythe made no further comment, but went on with her task of writing cards to be left upon all her friends in town, to acquaint them of her return.

“Pon my faith, I can think of no reason why you should pace up and down the room so, Amelia,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “Pray sit down, and cease to disturb us.”

Amelia sat down.

“And kindly do not fidget. I declare, I know not what to do with you, madam!” Mrs. Catchlove said. “If you would be conformable and accept Sir Lancelot you would not need to fidget.”

“Oh, the devil take Sir Lancelot!” Amelia said. Mrs. Catchlove and Miss Smythe suspended their employments to stare at her in astonishment. Amelia stood up again and resumed her pacing.

In another minute, however, she was driven into a seat and hastily took up her work, for Sir Lancelot himself was announced.

He was in as fine array as Amelia had yet seen, being covered in

lace and embroidery and paint, and he seemed largely to have recovered from his alarm. Amelia sewed assiduously while Sir Lancelot and her aunt exchanged courtesies, and Miss Smythe and Sir Lancelot were made known to each other.

“La, Sir Lancelot, I fancy you'll never guess what we say yesterday,” said Mrs. Catchlove. “Mr. North, the runner, arresting a highwayman! I'm sure 'tis one of the rascals who attacked you, even though Amelia will not admit to it.”

Had Amelia been so bold as to look at Sir Lancelot's face she might have been amused at the dismay so plainly depicted there. But she kept her eyes on her work.

“Zounds! I'm devilish glad to hear it,” he said unhappily. For he did not imagine the highwayman would be so reticent as Amelia to deny his embellishments of the truth of that encounter, and he was in some confusion to know how publicly his account would be contradicted.

“In truth, we cannot even be sure it was a highwayman,” Miss Smythe said. “There are, alas, many other crimes for which a man may be arrested.”

“Pon my soul, that's true enough,” Sir Lancelot said, brightening at this hopeful reflection.

“Still, Amelia is concerned for this poor wretch's fate,” Miss Smythe said. “We had resolved to find some charitable gentleman who might succour him as much as it is in our power to do so. Perhaps you, Sir Lancelot, might undertake this noble effort.”

“Egad!” Sir Lancelot said. “I cannot consort with criminals. 'Pon my faith, you cannot ask it of me, Miss Smythe.”

Miss Smythe gave him a considering look.

“Very well,” she said. “We shall no doubt be able to discover some other gentleman whose sensibilities are not so exquisite.”

“I'm sure you could hardly find a gentleman so nice as Sir Lancelot,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “'Twould be monstrous unkind to send him into any place so noisome as a prison.”

“That's true, by Jove,” Sir Lancelot said. “I always carry a perfumed handkerchief before my nose even in the street. I am sure I should be quite overcome to enter a gaol.”

Mrs. Catchlove continued to extol his refinement, but as neither Amelia nor Miss Smythe could be brought to speak a word, Sir Lancelot did not linger long.

A look between Amelia and her governess decided them both to leave the room, and reconvene in Amelia's chamber.

“What a paltry fellow he is!” Amelia said. “And he grows more so on closer acquaintance.”

Miss Smythe agreed heartily.

“I was confident that Mr. Arkwright was the most unsuitable claimant in the world to your hand, Amelia, but I perceive I was mistaken. Sir Lancelot is his equal if not his better in unsuitability.”

“Well, I am glad you approve my taste,” Amelia said.

“If not your taste, at least your distaste, my dear!”

They proceeded no further on this occasion, for Martha knocked on the door and entered, saying,

“There's a letter for you, Miss Amelia, by messenger.”

Amelia flew to seize it from her maid. The hand was unfamiliar, but she was in no doubt that it was Mr. Warwick's. Hastily she opened and read.

“No,” she groaned under her breath. “Martha, is the messenger still here?”

“He didn't say he was to wait for any reply, miss. But happen, he's still in the kitchen.”

“Oh, Martha, run and tell him to wait. I will answer immediately.” Amelia sat down at her desk and hastily scratched a half a dozen lines, folded this missive and inscribed the direction on the outside. Miss Smythe watched in incipient alarm.

Martha was soon back and was dispatched with the answer, Amelia breathlessly urging speed.

“Amelia, are you engaged in some intrigue?” Miss Smythe demanded. “That was not a lady's writing I am sure.”

“Oh, no, Miss Smythe, far from it,” Amelia said.

“With whom are you in correspondence, then?”

“Mr. Warwick,” Amelia said, with a boldness she was far from feeling.

“And who, pray, is Mr. Warwick?”

“The gentleman who escorted me home, after I had gone away with my highwayman.”

“Amelia, you told me you did not know his name or his direction. What am I to think but that this is an intrigue?”

“Oh, no, Miss Smythe, when I told you so it was true. I have only – only just discovered him. Those were the first letters exchanged between us. It is no flirtation, I do assure you. Indeed, he does not think very highly of me.”

“I doubt a clandestine correspondence will raise you in his esteem,” Miss Smythe said dryly. Amelia flushed.

“It is not clandestine,” she said. “You have seen me engaged in it.”

“That is sophistry, my dear. There can be no grounds for communication between you and Mr. Warwick which might bear your aunt or your father's scrutiny, I am sure.”

“Oh, Miss Smythe, pray do not betray me! I am sore enough beset about Sir Lancelot already, without Mr. Warwick coming under discussion. There is nothing dishonourable in what is projected between us. Here, you may read his letter.”

Miss Smythe took the letter and read. Whatever she might have expected, she was in no small degree surprised to read a detailed account of the gentleman's exertions on Dick Gamble's behalf. She was no less surprised to perceive the degree of confidence apparently subsisting between Mr. Warwick and Amelia, for he did not scruple to admit his fears, and to blame himself for a lack of adroitness in handling Mr. Beresford.

“You can see why I had to reply,” Amelia said.

“No, I cannot see why you should have entered into correspondence merely to acknowledge receipt of this.”

“But it was not merely to acknowledge it.”

“What then did you write to Mr. Warwick?”

“Only that I have a plan to rescue Dick from prison,” Amelia said.

## **Chapter 20**

The Crown and Anchor was not the earl's favourite retreat, and he had not intended to linger there after dispatching his letter to Amelia. He was on the point of issuing from the threshold when



he was accosted by the Honourable Freddy Inglenook.

“Jack! 'Pon my soul, I'm dashed glad to see you!”

“Hello, Freddie. What brings you to so unfashionable a den? Thought you never stirred from St. James' before dinner, sir.”

“My lord, have you not seen the delectable Kate?”

“I fear I have not, sir. Who is the delectable Kate?”

“The bar maid, of course. Come, drink a glass with me. She is well worth seeing I promise you.” The Hon. Frederick Inglenook swept the earl into the tap room.

“There!” he said, when they had seated themselves and been served by the blushing Kate. “Is she not delicious, my lord?”

“Well enough, sir, well enough,” the earl said.

“Well enough, he says. I'd think you were growing old, Jack, if I hadn't heard about your Amazon.”

“I do not take your meaning, sir,” the earl said.

“Oh, come, my lord. Half a dozen of the fellows saw you last night, on horseback with a lass riding astride beside you. By what Frank Weatherby said, it was a servant girl, but as comely as an actress and sat a horse as well as a goddess. I'd heard no inkling before of any new intrigue of yours. Who is this Amazon?”

The earl threw himself back in his chair and laughed ruefully.

“Oh, Freddie, you don't know the half of it.”

“Then I pray you, enlighten me, my lord.”

“No, sir. Honour bids me be silent.”

“Why? You've no other mistress in keeping at the moment, to be made jealous, I'll wager.”

“Who was it witnessed this edifying spectacle?” the earl demanded.

“Faith, I don't know, except Weatherby who told me of it. But half the town must know by now.”

The earl frowned and swore under his breath. Mr. Inglenook continued to press him for information, but the earl scarcely heard him. He was not recalled to a sense of his company until a letter was presented to him. He tore it open and read.

“Damn!” said the earl, scowling dreadfully. Mr. Inglenook was abruptly silenced. “Your pardon, sir, I must leave you.” He departed abruptly and made for Mrs. Catchlove's residence.

Part way there he bethought himself that he had no cards, except those which styled him Earl of Creasy, and he stopped in at a coffee house to write a note. Then he proceeded to Mrs. Catchlove's door and boldly knocked. To the servant who answered he said,

“Is Mrs. Catchlove within?”

“Mrs. Catchlove is gone to Lady Wickham, sir.”

“Is Miss Loftus within?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Would you be so good as to take her this note?”

The servant disappeared. Amelia, sitting quietly at home with Miss Smythe in punishment for her distracted mien, tore open the single sheet and read that Mr. Warwick craved the honour of an interview.

“Oh, yes, admit him immediately,” she said. She jumped up and walked back and forth across the room, sat down again, rose again and sat again, seeming more breathless that warranted by so little exercise.

“Who is it, Amelia?” Miss Smythe said.

“It is Mr. Warwick.”

Before Miss Smythe could protest the visitor was in the room.

“Oh, Mr. Warwick, how thoughtful of you to come. Now we may talk over my plan at leisure. Miss Smythe, may I present Mr. Warwick?”

Miss Smythe nodded coldly without rising from her chair.

“Your servant, ma'am,” the earl said automatically, making his bow. Then he turned to Amelia.

“I have not come to talk over your plan at leisure. I have come to insist that you immediately abandon such a wild scheme. I assure you, madam, I shall have nothing to do with it.”

“But, sir, your part in it is essential,” Amelia said. “It will do us no good to spirit Dick out of Newgate if there is no one to ensure he gets out of the way of being re-taken.”

“Precisely, madam. And I promise you I will not lift a finger to assist you to place yourself in such a position, not even for Dick's sake.”

“Really! 'Tis hardly honourable in you, sir, to abandon your friend, when Miss Smythe and I are prepared to save him.”

The earl turned his displeasure on Miss Smythe.

“I can hardly believe, madam, you could be so shatter-brained as to second Miss Loftus in such a dangerous undertaking.”

“I think as you do, sir,” Miss Smythe said. “You have no idea what threats Amelia has used to force my compliance. She declares she will marry Sir Lancelot if I do not assist her.”

“Marry Sir Lancelot! You abandoned little hoyden!” the earl said. He strode up to Amelia, very obviously requiring a considerable effort to refrain from shaking her. “You would not do so mad a thing!”

“Indeed I would, Mr. Warwick, if I was driven to it. But Miss Smythe, you see, is too reasonable to resist, and so I hope you will be.”

“Do not think to frighten me with empty threats, my girl,” said the earl.

“It is not an empty threat,” said Amelia. In token of which, she sat down to her aunt's writing box, scrawled out an acceptance, directed it to Sir Lancelot and rang the bell.

“William, convey this letter to the post, please,” she said to the footman who answered. She held out the letter. William received it from her and bowed himself out of the room. Miss Smythe, the earl and Amelia all stood unmoving.

“Stay,” the earl said, as if it was forced from him. Amelia smiled delightedly and ran to recall William.

“I knew you would be reasonable, Mr. Warwick,” she said.

“Reasonable! I must be mad!” the earl replied.

They began a lengthy quarrel over the details of Amelia's scheme. Having finally adjusted it to their mutual satisfaction, the earl angrily took his leave. He strode fiercely through three streets before he stopped suddenly, threw back his head and laughed until the streets echoed with it.

“Utterly mad!” he confirmed cheerfully.

To reach his own house, the earl had to negotiate a narrow passageway into the square. His footsteps rang out in the dark as he went through this deserted alley. With only a fraction of a second's notice in the form of a scuffling sound behind him, he was set upon.

The earl had not entirely forgotten Nell Kelly's warning and had selected one particular walking stick to assist in his perambulations. As quickly as they were on him, he whipped the thin blade from its concealment and brought his assailants up short with a slashing flurry. He had the satisfaction of feeling the sword rip through one man's sleeve before the rogues turned and fled. The earl laughed sardonically and proceeded on his way, his sword still ready until he came to his own door.

The footman who saw him sheath the weapon as he entered made no comment.

“Is Mr. Newcombe within?” the earl asked.

“In the library, my lord.” The earl went to his secretary. Newcombe looked up inquiringly.

The earl flung himself down in a chair and laughed, this time ruefully.

“I have not made any great success of anything today,” he confided.

“I am sorry to hear that, my lord. Did you see Mr. Gamble in Newgate?”

“I succeeded in that, at least,” said the earl and launched into an account of what he had done for Dick.

“I do not perceive how you might have done more, my lord,” Newcombe said. The earl looked positively mischievous.

“But I am going to do more,” he said. “And so, Henry, are you!”

## **Chapter 21**

Early the next day, Amelia sought and received permission to spend the morning in attending Miss Smythe on a visit to some of her old friends. Mrs. Catchlove might normally have objected to Amelia being introduced amongst women she was sure were blue-stockings, engaged in the fatally unfashionable pursuit of discoursing on all the most unladylike branches of knowledge – indeed it was rumoured some of them even studied mathematics – but Mrs. Catchlove was in high irritation at Amelia's continuing coldness to Sir Lancelot.

“I'm sure you may do as you please, Amelia, since you will not behave prettily to a gentleman who deserves your admiration,” Mrs. Catchlove said.

“Thank you, aunt,” Amelia said as if quite unmoved by her aunt's disapproval.

At much the same time the earl again visited Dick in his prison, where he was relieved to find the highwayman installed in a private cell, with a sturdy door to keep out the drafts. The earl had a good deal to tell him, and left the prisoner in a rather agitated state.

At the same time, Newcombe was booking passage to Ireland on a ship which lay already provisioned in the Thames. He then supervised the removal of the earl's coat of arms from one of his coaches.

At about two o'clock, Mrs. Catchlove watched Amelia and Miss Smythe depart. She remained distressed at their intentions. When added to her determination not to wear paint, this induction among the bluestockings would seriously prejudice the fashionable world

against Amelia. Mrs. Catchlove hoped devoutly that Sir Lancelot's passion would be proof against such harsh blows, for she could hardly conceive of a better husband for anyone.

Sir Lancelot himself appeared within a few moments of Amelia's departure.

“La, Sir Lancelot! You have just missed Amelia. I'm monstrous sorry.”

Sir Lancelot, bowing to Mrs. Catchlove, did not appear much cast down by this doleful intelligence. Had Mrs. Catchlove relinquished her own desire to see Amelia as Lady Scoby, he would have been glad enough to see his beloved no more. But embarrassing as it was to meet Amelia's satirical eye while she held the threat of exposure over him, he knew not how to repudiate Mrs. Catchlove's enthusiastic support.

“Pon my soul, madam, I'm glad to see you at any rate,” Sir Lancelot said.

Mrs. Catchlove blushed and giggled.

“La! I don't know what you should want with an old widow like me, when you have such a pretty gal as Amelia to look at.”

“Old? Widow you may be, madam, but - egad! - I'm sure you're young enough to be Miss Amelia's sister.” She rapped his knuckles with her fan. Sir Lancelot was much heartened by this very feminine reception of his gallantry.

“Sure, we may have a quiet chat without Amelia for once,” Mrs. Catchlove said.

Amelia and Miss Smythe did not immediately call upon the eccentric Miss Moncton, but hired a room in an inn. Here they were soon joined by Martha, who came to them carrying a large basket full of clothes. Martha bustled about, helping both Amelia and her governess to change from their silk dresses to simple

country frocks. To complete the deception, Amelia's high French coiffure was pulled apart, the false hair, cushion and ornaments tossed into the basket, and her hair vigorously brushed to free it of powder.

"I confess I don't know what excuse you can give your aunt when you reappear before her with your hair all undressed," Miss Smythe said.

"It won't matter," Amelia said. She regarded herself in the mirror. Dressed once more in Martha's clothes, with her hair tumbling about her shoulders and a mob cap on her head, she thought she could easily be taken for a maid from the country. When she came to survey Miss Smythe, she was less satisfied, for there was no servant in her aunt's house who could have supplied a dress for so tall a lady, but Miss Smythe was wearing her oldest and plainest gown, as well as a ragged and voluminous shawl and a broad bonnet, and should pass well enough. She could always claim to be wearing her mistress' cast off dress.

As two maid servants with one large basket, therefore, they presented themselves at Newgate prison, petitioning to see their prodigal but beloved kinsman Dick Gamble. Amelia was required to undergo a pretty thorough scrutiny before she passed, for as the under-warden candidly told them, he thought Dick monstrously lucky to have such a pretty dish for a cousin. Amelia blushed and simpered at him as well as she could. Miss Smythe was subjected to a more cursory scrutiny. Besides being older and decidedly plainer, such a tall woman would be easily recognized again, for all her face was half buried in a linen handkerchief as she sobbed her grief and shame to be seeing poor Dick in such a place.

They were admitted. In their state of nerves neither lady could suppress a start as the gate clanged shut behind them, but an alarmed glance at the gatekeepers showed that this was interpreted as a typical reaction of female visitors.

Neither could they forbear to stare about them in horror. The scene which met their eyes was the same as that which had moved the



earl before them. Only as the day was more advanced the pitch of drunken frenzy was greater in the common yard.

“You've not been here before,” the keeper commented. Amelia looked questioningly at him. “Everybody stares the first time they come. Your cousin's in a private room. Some gentleman paid for him. This way.” He conducted them to Dick's cell.

The highwayman was lying on his bed, wrapped in a filthy blanket. He seemed in deep despair, for he neither moved nor spoke as they entered the room.

“Alas, dear cousin, I never thought to see you here,” Miss Smythe moaned, her handkerchief still in play.

“Oh, Dick, do look at us,” Amelia said. Dick rolled over on the bed and stared at them distractedly enough. Miss Smythe crossed the narrow room and knelt facing the bed, burying her face in her hands and moaning.

The official lost interest and drifted away. Amelia pulled the door closed.

“Quick, Dick!” she hissed. “Do you know what you have to do?”

“Yes, miss. Warwick told me,” he said. He tumbled off the bed. “If it's not the maddest scheme I ever heard!”

“Oh, never mind that now,” Amelia said. “There will be time aplenty to play the critic later. Miss Smythe, do you go first.”

“Very well,” Miss Smythe said. “You shall turn your head away, sir,” she said to Dick Gamble. He managed to sketch a bow and a smile.

“With my gratitude, ma'am.” He took up his station by the door, on watch for any interruption, while with Amelia's aid Miss Smythe hastily changed into yet a third costume. She would have seemed none too fine in Mrs. Catchlove's opinion, but she could

hardly have presented a greater contrast to the attire of any other woman in the gaol if she had been wearing cloth of gold.

“Now you, Dick” Amelia commanded. Dick stood looking as sheepish as he might while the two ladies then proceeded to dress him in the clothes Miss Smythe had cast off. Amelia could hardly suppress her nervous giggles as they put round him hoop and petticoat, laced him into stays and commanded him to put off his shirt and waistcoat, and put the dress over his head.

“It is most fortunate Miss Smythe should be so tall,” Amelia said. “You could never otherwise have fit into her clothes. But you are almost of a size.”

“He still does not look entirely feminine,” Miss Smythe said.

“It is for that you came in in such a ridiculous shawl and bonnet. They will hide his neck and head well enough. Pray take off your wig, Dick. It was a lucky thought of Mr. Warwick's to be sure you should be well shaved at least,” Amelia said briskly as she put the shawl around him and tied the bonnet on his head. After surveying her work critically she said, “Now it is of the utmost importance you should keep the handkerchief always before your face. And see if you cannot weep and wail.”

“Nay, as for squalling like a cat, that I will not do,” Dick protested. “Not if you was to hang me.”

“That is what we are endeavouring to prevent, sir,” Miss Smythe said dryly.

“Now, Miss Smythe, you must take Dick's place upon the bed. And do keep well wrapped up in the blanket.”

Miss Smythe surveyed the filthy mattress and coverings with frank distaste. She made no complaint, however, and was soon in the highwayman's place.

A knock at the door set Amelia frantically gesturing to Dick to

kneel down by the bed with his face averted. She turned to face the door as Mr. Newcombe came in.

“You shall be a dissenting clergyman,” the earl had decreed the night before.

“My lord, I protest!” Newcombe had said. “A dissenter! It is too much.”

“Well, it is all bad enough without having you personating a member of the established church. Let us not needlessly compound crime upon crime.” the earl had said. “Come, you have disdained that role once before. It is only to do it a second time.”

Newcombe, therefore, came in in the role of a non-conformist preacher.

“Oh, parson,” Amelia said appealingly. “Have you come to comfort Dick? Try if you can, for he will neither look at us, nor speak nor get off the bed.”

Mr. Newcombe came forward with a look of squeamish dismay which Amelia thought very well done until she realized that it was his genuine attitude. She was a little alarmed at this, but Mr. Newcombe was apparently resigned to his role.

“I have indeed,” he said peevishly. “It is not my practise to frequent prisons, but at the instigation of his – of Mr. Warwick I have come to attempt to bring this poor wretch into a better frame of mind.” This pious intention, as they had hoped, drove away the warder who had conducted Mr. Newcombe.

Newcombe looked at Amelia and made a stiff bow.

“Miss Loftus, I presume,” he said.

“Yes. And you must be Mr. Newcombe.” He bowed in acknowledgement. Dick now scrambled to his feet. Newcombe looked a little startled when he saw that it was the highwayman

arrayed in women's clothes.

“Oh, did you think it was Miss Smythe?” Amelia said. “I must say that augurs well, if you were taken in when you knew the scheme.” Mr. Newcombe seemed somewhat embarrassed and said nothing.

“What's o'clock?” Dick said. Mr. Newcombe pulled out his watch.

“Four o'clock,” he said.

“Gracious! We must not lose an instant! Come, dear cousin.” After a last adjustment to his shawl and bonnet, Amelia picked up the basket and prepared to depart.

“Oh, dear,” she said suddenly, “you do not walk at all like Miss Smythe.”

“I can't help that, miss,” Dick said.

“Well, you must pretend to be overcome, and lean on me as we go. The handkerchief, remember!” She seized the highwayman's arm, and they passed out of the room together.

To Amelia it seemed as if the dark passage and the noisome yard they were to cross were as wide as the whole city of London. Also she felt as if every eye was upon them in suspicion and alarm. Her every instinct was to run, but she knew she must not run. So diligently had Dick Gamble hidden his face in Miss Smythe's handkerchief that he could not see to walk, and she was obliged to guide him. A warder passed and looked at them. Amelia jabbed her elbow into Dick's rib and hissed,

“Cry!” Dick issued a falsetto wail. “No, no, enough,” Amelia said hastily. “Just heave your shoulders a little, as if you were sobbing.” Dick did as directed as they stumbled up a flight of stairs.

They made their way across the endless expanse of the prison yard, eliciting some catcalls as they went from the more drunken and the

more impudent. Amelia was almost glad of it, for the blushes she felt colouring her cheeks would thereby hide her agitation from another cause.

They came to the gate at last. It looked to Amelia far more massive than it had on the way in.

“Do not despair, dearest Elizabeth,” she said in a broken voice, as the gatekeepers once more looked them over. “We shall all meet again in a better place as parson said.” She felt Dick's shoulders shaking against her, and realize to her alarm that he was laughing. With a fierce surreptitious movement she stamped on his foot.

It seemed an endless moment before the door opened, but in fact the gate keeper passed them quite casually. He had forgotten neither the younger maid's pretty face nor the older jade's outlandish shawl and bonnet.

Once outside the gate, Amelia found it harder than ever not to run. But they must maintain the characters they were playing until they were certainly out of sight of any wardens.

She could not suppress a moan when no coach met her eye, but it was there, only a little further down the street beyond sight of the gate.

The earl jumped down from the coachman's seat and with no more delay than that required for a snickering survey of Dick Gamble's finery, bowed and opened the coach door. He assisted first Amelia, and then, with an elaborate show of gallantry, Dick, into the coach, resumed his place and whipped up the horses.

There was no time for either relief or further anxiety. As they were jolted over the paving stones, Amelia assisted Dick out of his borrowed plumage and into the suit of clothes the earl had placed within the coach. The discarded apparel was barely back in Amelia's basket before the coach drew up near the river.

Dick Gamble emerged from the coach. The earl once more vaulted

down and grinned at him. They walked the hundred yards to the river stairs briskly.

“Remember, your passage is booked in the name of Dick Farnham,” the earl said. “Your luggage is already aboard. Send me word as soon as you are arrived, and I will see that your Molly and your boys are sent over to join you.”

Dick grasped the earl's hand.

“I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Warwick,” he said huskily.

“Pay your rent on time,” the earl said whimsically. “There's no time for sentiment, Dick. Your ship sails with the tide. Godspeed.” They shook hands heartily once more. In another minute Dick was in the boat and making for his vessel and freedom. The earl looked after him for only an instant, and then went back to the coach and Amelia.

## **Chapter 22**

In the meantime Miss Smythe had scrambled up from Dick's bed. Newcombe was again startled to perceive how tall she was, barely an inch shorter than his own six feet.

“I am sorry you should have been drawn into this adventure, sir,” she said.

“Not at all, Miss Smythe,” he said in some confusion, for she had echoed his thoughts with great precision.

“I tremble to think what a distorted notion this must give you of Amelia's character,” Miss Smythe said. Even as she spoke she was arranging Dick's wig and the blanket to personate the departed highwayman. She then moved to a corner where she would not be seen by anyone who glanced in the door.

“Why, no, madam. I at any rate have not the responsibility for her behaviour,” he said, wondering how the earl should ever have become entangled with the headstrong Amelia. Miss Smythe, however, interpreted his words as a reflection on her own stewardship of Amelia's propensities and coloured darkly. Perceiving this, and colouring in his turn, Newcombe stammered,

“I beg your pardon, madam. I intended no personal reflection. Merely I am ill at ease in the role that his – that Mr. Warwick has imposed on me.”

“No more so than I at what Amelia has forced me to do,” Miss Smythe said. “And indeed I am much obliged to you, for your part is only to increase my comfort. So you see why I feel tenderly towards you at being embroiled in Amelia's outrageous scheme.”

“I thought it was Warwick's outrageous scheme,” Newcombe said, won to fleeting amusement as well.

“No, I assure you, all the most sensible parts of it are Mr. Warwick's emendations. Had we gone on as Amelia suggested, no provision would have been made to get me out of Newgate, nor to protect ourselves from discovery at a later date.”

“Then, madam, since my part is to get you out of Newgate, I can only be delighted to have been included.”

The hardest part of their task was now begun, which was simply to wait, for the earl's anxious care had provided that Miss Smythe in her second character must not leave for half an hour.

Newcombe and Miss Smythe looked at each other in some dismay as the notion of passing the half hour settled in their minds. Finally Miss Smythe chuckled softly.

“I was wondering what subject of discourse to introduce,” she said in response to his inquiring gaze, “quite as if we were two people who had not been formally introduced who found themselves alone together in a drawing room.”

“Let us then rectify the omission,” he said. “Miss Smythe, allow me to introduce myself to you. Henry Newcombe, secretary to the Earl of Creasy.” Immediately he was inwardly alarmed, for Miss Smythe's frank good humour had led him on to mention what the earl had impressed upon him must be kept secret.

“Secretary to the Earl of Creasy! Mr. Warwick moves in higher circles than I had thought,” Miss Smythe said ingenuously.

“Oh, he is of the first order of politeness,” Newcombe said. “I fear you must have imbibed a distorted notion of my friend's character from this escapade as well. I assure you it is not customary to him.”

“Perhaps I did,” Miss Smythe said consideringly. “For although on the one occasion when I met Mr. Warwick he was quite gentlemanly and – and amiable, it could not be unknown to me that he consorted with highwaymen.”

“In short, you thought him an adventurer?” Newcombe said, amusement winning out over alarm.

“I did,” she confessed. “I cherished, in fact, a concern that Amelia should have been drawn into acquaintance with such a disreputable character.”

Newcombe laughed outright and said,

“Perhaps we may agree that both Miss Loftus and Mr. Warwick are, in the preponderance, of as sedate and religious a tendency as our two selves, and that this whole adventure is in the nature of a distempered freak.”

“Quite so,” said Miss Smythe. “Let us be generous to them as to ourselves. My only fear is that they may incite each other to further rashness. How came you to be an earl's secretary?” Newcombe was very willing to answer her.



When the half hour had elapsed more agreeably than either of them had bargained for, Newcombe stepped to the door, and awaiting a moment when the cell appeared to be unobserved, motioned Miss Smythe out.

Miss Smythe went rapidly into the common yard of the prison. Here she stopped short, and indeed it was no great difficulty to assume a look of horror and pity at the sight of so many abandoned wretches. She spoke to several of the women in turn until she found one not far gone in drunkenness.

“My poor girl, what brings you here?” she asked. The woman stared at her before replying,

“The filing lay, ma'am.”

“And what is that?”

“I took a counterpane from a shop, ma'am.”

“Had you no money to pay for it?”

“No, ma'am. Where would I get money?”

“Poor wretch! Have you no employment?”

“I was 'prenticed to a milliner, ma'am. But she beat me so, I run away.”

“If I give you a shilling, will you spend it on food and proper comforts, and not on drink?”

“Oh, yes, ma'am!” Miss Smythe gave the girl a shilling, wondering as she did so whether there was any chance it would not go on drink, and whether she herself had not done wrong to require a lie before dispensing charity.

“I hope you will go to the chapel on Sundays and listen to the sermon, poor girl,” she said. The woman seemed to find this an

unaccountable suggestion, and made no reply. Newcombe now came up to her.

“Why, Mrs. Cuthbert, I did not expect to see you here,” he said.

“Mr. Tilly! No more did I expect to see you,” Miss Smythe replied. She had no need to assume a look of relief on meeting him.

“I confess, I knew you already for a good and charitable woman, but this raises you yet more in my esteem,” he said, still reciting his part stiffly. “May I have the pleasure of escorting you home, ma'am?”

Miss Smythe assented wholeheartedly and they crossed without further delay to the gate.

“Here,” said the gatekeeper. “Who might you be, madam?”

“This is Mrs. Cuthbert, a benevolent lady who is very well known to me,” Newcombe said. “By what right do you accost her?”

“Well, I remembers you coming in, Mr. Tilly, but I don't call to mind seeing this lady with you.”

“Of course not,” Miss Smythe said. “We came separately, without each other's knowledge, and met here quite by chance.”

“Well, I don't remember you coming in by yourself either, madam.”

“Well, I remember you, young man,” Miss Smythe said. “Your insolence impressed me at the time. Here is the same letter I showed you before.”

Newcombe here took the warder aside and whispered,

“Perhaps it was some other official who was at the gate when Mrs. Cuthbert came in? She is rather near-sighted, you know, but does not like to own it. She would assert she recognized you, even if it

was some other person who admitted her.”

“That's as may be, if she come afore two o'clock,” said the warden, examining the letter.

“Oh, certainly she has been here some hours,” Newcombe said. “It was one-thirty when you came in, was it not, Mrs. Cuthbert?”

“Certainly,” Miss Smythe said haughtily. “My good man, it is quite ridiculous of you to question me. I am in, am I not? So I must have come in.”

This being undeniably true, the gate was then opened to them, for however odd the incident, the gatekeeper was quite certain that this imperious lady had been presented to him neither as felon nor as debtor, and was not to be confined.

Newcombe and Miss Smythe passed out of the gate. They experienced some of the same sensations as had Amelia earlier, feeling a strong impulse to flee, but they moved decorously along the pavement and down several more streets, before they stopped to regard each other and break out into hysterical laughter.

They could not but feel a great relief, although they knew many things must be done to ensure they were not later suspected of complicity. They repaired therefore without delay to the inn where Amelia and Miss Smythe had begun their adventure, where Martha still awaited them. Within a few minutes of their arrival, Amelia was set down at the door and Newcombe taken up in the coach, with the earl still in his role of coachman. There was barely time for hasty adieus before the coach clattered away and Amelia and Miss Smythe hastened back to the room they had hired.

They looked at each other blankly.

“I wish we might have had more time to express our thanks to Mr. Warwick and Mr. Newcombe,” Amelia said.

“Well, my dear, we can only hope they can imagine it to

themselves. I cannot perceive any further occasion of meeting them – indeed I fear it would be dangerous to do so. If any of us come to be suspected, we must take the greatest pains not to lead the officers of the law to the rest of our co-conspirators.”

“Yes, that is true,” Amelia said. “I had not thought on that. But at all events I must write to Mr. Warwick, just once, to express my sense of obligation.”

“No, Amelia, you must not. There can be no present occasion for such a correspondence to outweigh its impropriety.”

Amelia laughed suddenly.

“Oh, Miss Smythe, we have just been engaged in assisting a highwayman to escape from prison, and you speak of impropriety!”

Miss Smythe was equally reduced to laughter. Their merriment lasted long, for it gave them some relief for all the anxieties of the day.

“I must say I am proud of you, Miss Smythe. You performed your part to perfection, I am sure. And I must confess also I feel quite pleased with myself. I know I should not – I have done a wicked thing. But how delightful to have succeeded in it!”

With Martha's help they now finally resumed the gowns they had worn on leaving Mrs. Catchlove. Martha was dispatched with the basket containing Amelia's disguise and both of Miss Smythe's, and the two ladies proceeded to keep their appointment with the celebrated Miss Moncton.

The earl and Newcombe proceeded directly home. Newcombe's only remaining task was to see the coat of arms restored to the coach, and bribe the coachman to say nothing of the earl's fancy to drive it himself, but the earl had yet another stratagem to arrange. He went to call at a very elegant set of rooms of whom the tenant, by a curious coincidence, was one Mrs. Cuthbert.

“My lord,” she said, coming towards him with both hands held out, “I am delighted to see you again.”

“No more so than I to see you, madam,” he said, saluting her cheek with the utmost gallantry.

“Faith, you are a rake still! What brings you out to an ugly old woman instead of a pretty young one?”

“Why, my respect for your wit and ingenuity, madam.”

“Give over,” she said heartily. “Come, sit down, Jack. Do you miss my little establishment?”

“Not so much as I miss the guineas I lost at your faro table, ma'am.”

Mrs. Cuthbert laughed.

“You were a young sprig then, bent on cutting a wild dash. I never saw any man so cool at dropping a thousand pounds on a single card. But I do not complain. Your losses have assisted me into my genteel retirement. No more gaming hells for Betty Cuthbert! I am quite the lady now.”

“I know it, and I rely on you to do me a considerable service,” said the earl, quite unabashed.

“How now?”

“Why simply to retire into the country for a month. A good way into the country.”

“Whatever for, my lord?”

“That if you should be sought and questioned, some time must elapse before you are found.”

“Faith, and what am I to be questioned about?”

“Why, your visit to Newgate today.”

“Visit to Newgate! My lord, you wrong me. I have never been in Newgate in my life.”

The earl laughed.

“I know it, madam,” he said. “But what I wish is that you shall swear that you were there today, between one-thirty and four-thirty, charitably relieving the wretched of that place.”

“I cannot conceive what your object might be, my lord.”

“Can you not? That is all to the better. I ask only that you acknowledge such a visit, if you are questioned and insist that it was you. I have even procured a letter of introduction for you, which I would desire you to keep by you, and to produce if pressed, to prove your contention. Oh, and if anyone should be presented to you as a witness, whom you do not recognize, you may feign near-sightedness – although of course you will heatedly deny any such weakness.”

“And why should I do such a thing, my lord?”

“Why, for the love you bear me. I will, of course, defray the expenses of your sojourn in the country, and a little over as well.”

The lady was not proof against such a tender appeal, and the earl was soon satisfied that she could perfectly repeat her lesson of having gone to Newgate, and there met one Mr. Tilly, a dissenting clergyman of her acquaintance, by whom she was escorted from the place, that she had been only in the common yard, talking to the women prisoners, and that the gatekeeper was a saucy fellow to have accosted her.

“Faith, I'd give a hundred pounds to know what wild devilry of yours requires this start, my lord,” Mrs. Cuthbert said.

“You shall know as soon as it is safe, madam, and without fees.”

He took his leave in a mood of considerable satisfaction. He could not but laugh at intervals on his way home, although the remembrance of his previous night's fracas caused him to take the long way round and stay to main streets.

“Perhaps this is the last wild frolic of youth,” he thought. “I may now settle down to sedate middle age with a full budget of adventure to look back upon.”

He was setting his foot upon the first step up to his own door when a sudden blow to the head made him drop senseless into the arms of his assailant.

## **Chapter 23**

Amelia was not greatly surprised to be requested the next morning to grant a private interview to Mr. North. Miss Smythe, indeed, gave her a look of alarm, and Mrs. Catchlove exclaimed she was prodigious curious to hear what the runner might have to say, but Amelia immediately desired the servant to show Mr. North into the drawing room, where she would be glad to satisfy his request. She lingered only to exchange a look charged with meaning with Miss Smythe and to assure her aunt of a full account of what passed between her and the runner, before going to him.

“I have come to inquire whether you might not have improved your memory, miss,” he said.

“I regret I can tell you no more of the highwayman I met than I did before, sir,” Amelia said, conscious that she was blushing a little.

“I have thought on it, at length, I can assure you.”

“Oh, I've no doubt of that, miss” he agreed. “Indeed I'm

wondering whether Dick Gamble, who we took up in your presence, miss, might not after all be the man? Quite understandable you should be mistaken in the flurry of the moment, but sure, you must have recollected him later. You went to see him in Newgate, after all.”

Amelia was aware of her heart pounding and the flush of her cheeks deepening. As airily as she could, she said,

“Visit him in Newgate? Oh, no, sir, you are quite mistaken.”

“Well, miss, I've had a particular account of all his visitors from the keepers there, and if it wasn't you who went to Dick yesterday, sure it must have been your twin.”

“Well, I cannot account for it, Mr. North, but you must realize how improper it would have been in me to visit a criminal in his cell at Newgate.”

“Indeed, miss, it seems quite extraordinary you should do so, especially if this Dick Gamble was unknown to you. I suppose I shall have to bring the keeper to see whether he can identify you.”

“Wait,” Amelia said. “Mr. North, must this come to anyone else's ears?”

“Why, it's a very serious business, miss. I can't keep it to myself.”

Amelia had no need to make an effort to look unhappy and alarmed.

“Oh, sir, I did go, and I know I said he was my cousin, but that is not precisely a crime, is it? I meant no harm, although I did tell a lie. Only my aunt would not hear of my going to see this rascal, as she called him, so I wore my maid's dress and went in secret. But you need not tell my aunt of it, surely?”

“And who was it went with you?”



“My governess, Miss Smythe.”

“Well, that does seem an odd thing for a governess to do,” Mr. North pointed out politely.

“I know. I confess I bullied her into it, and she would not go, except with a handkerchief to cover her face, lest she should be recognized, which I thought showed very little spirit. Oh, Mr. North, you will not tell, will you? It would be so damaging to Miss Smythe, and I cannot see how it will help you to catch the other man, the highwayman who did rob Sir Lancelot.”

“You still maintain Dick Gamble is not the man?”

“Oh, no, sir, assuredly he is not. Why besides seeing him on the street, I have seen him in prison, and he is quite different to my highwayman. I know I am not good at describing, but I do think I would have recollected if it had been the same man.”

“Then why did you go to see him, miss?”

Amelia infused a little pique into her voice as she replied,

“Because I felt pity for him and I wanted to be charitable.”

“And that was your only reason?”

“Yes, sir.” Amelia had now come to what she felt must be her most telling speech, and as Miss Smythe had advised, she thought of Mr. Arkwright's proposals to aid her in expressing indignant mortification. “I must say that it did not answer. He was seemingly quite insensible of our graciousness to him. He swore at us, and was not the least grateful for our visit. I was quite glad to be able to leave when the gentleman came.”

“The gentleman?”

“Yes, he was a non-conformist preacher, I think. I still spoke to him as if I were the prisoner's cousin, for I did not wish to be

discovered, but Miss Smythe and I left within a few minutes of his arrival.”

“And you did not know this clergyman?”

“Oh, no,” Amelia said. “If I had ever seen him before I am sure I should have recollected it, for I am not acquainted with any dissenters. My father would never allow them near his family. He says they incite the lower orders.” Mr. North appeared to ponder her statement.

“Oh, sir,” she continued. “I do beg you will not betray me, nor Miss Smythe either. I know I should not have gone, and indeed, now I see how thankless a task it is to be charitable to prisoners, I will never do so again. Oh, pray, promise me you will say nothing to my aunt!”

“Well, I will say nothing for the present.”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. North I am indeed very sorry I told the gatekeeper a lie, but I hope you will not let Miss Smythe suffer for it, for it was my idea and not hers.”

“Perhaps I should have a word with your Miss Smythe.”

“I can easily perceive that you would wish to do so, sir, but she has not risen from her bed today. I did not expect her to be so overcome, but she is quite ill.”

The runner went thoughtfully to join his lieutenant in the street. He stood for some moments in silent thought, fingering his lip.

“Well, is yon fine lady the one?” George Haskell asked at last.

“That's more than I can tell you, Georgie. I thought for sure she had some part in it. She even admitted to going to see Gamble yesterday. But she seemed so certain that I was come to tell her aunt of her adventure, and so upset about her little lie about being his cousin, that I'm bound to say she does not seem to know he has

escaped.” He laughed shortly. “She seems more piqued that her charity was repulsed than anxious about Dick. I don't know. We'd best bend our minds to finding this Mr. Tilly and Mrs. Cuthbert. His coming to see Gamble after the ladies did, and her being seen to go out and not in seems mighty suspicious.”

“I'm sure I can't see how it was done,” Georgie confessed.

“No more can I,” Mr. North replied. “And I'm not certain yet that fine young lady had no hand in it.”

Martha was that afternoon sent out to throw the dress that Miss Smythe had worn as “Mrs. Cuthbert” into the river.

## **Chapter 24**

The earl awoke about mid-day, with a fierce pounding ache in his head to remind him of the previous night's event. He could vaguely remember being bundled into a coach, and being bound hand and foot, and what seemed an endless journey through the streets, but he had no idea where he now was, nor how much time had elapsed while he lay dazed or sleeping.

He looked about him, becoming aware that his bonds were still in place. He was in what might have been a closet, lit only by the shafts of daylight admitted by cracks in the boards. His place of confinement was not large enough even to permit him to stretch to his full length, and there appeared to be nothing in it but himself.

The earl managed to shift himself so as to bring his eye to one of the cracks in his prison. He could see nothing but a mean courtyard, heaped with refuse and bounded by a grimy wall. A few minutes attention to the sounds and smells which came to him from without convinced him that he must be in one of the disreputable quarters of the city hard by the river.

He tested his bonds and found them unyielding. Nor could he see any projection against which he might rub the ropes with any hope of making them part. He set himself to do the only thing he could do, which was to wait.

The discomforts of his cramped position, hunger, thirst, and above all the ache in his head did not dispose him to any very cheerful reflections, but he was not much frightened. A little thought assured him that if Black Billy had wanted him dead he would never have awoken. The rogue was too resolute, and had too many desperate characters under him, to leave a man to starve in a closet when he might see his throat slit immediately.

After a while his head seemed to clear and he bethought himself of an expedient. Although he could move only clumsily, he began to kick methodically against the wall of the closet. He was beginning to have hopes he might batter his way out, when the top of his prison opened, and two pairs of hands hauled him out unceremoniously.

He looked up to see two ragged creatures, leering villainously at him.

“The cove's still got some ginger in him,” said one.

“We'll have to thump him again,” said the other.

“I'd advise against it,” said his lordship.

“Damme,” said the first. “He'd advise against it. Who'd ever have thought it?”

“I can be a more generous friend than Black Billy,” said the earl as calmly as he could.

“Not without your purse, gov,” said the second. Both guards were much diverted by this pleasantry.

“D'ye think Black Billy would be so daft as to leave you to buy

your way out?" said the first rogue. "Oh, no, he's a fly cove, is Billy."

"If you'll accompany me to my house, I'll see you are well rewarded," the earl persisted.

"And then let us be off without a word to the magistrates, I'll wager." They laughed again.

"Let's give him another knock on the head," said one.

"No, no. Black Billy wants him undamaged," said the other. "We'll put him in the cellar. There's nothing to kick there." The man took out a knife and cut loose the ropes that bound the earl's feet. The two of them hauled him upright.

The hope of making a dash for freedom died as it was formed. The earl found he could barely keep to his feet. His head giddy and his muscles cramped, he was half carried by his captors as they took him into the tenement. They opened a door in the narrow hallway and walked him down a rickety flight of stairs into the cellar.

One of them gave him a shove. The earl sprawled his length on the cellar floor while the two rogues laughed again, mounted the steps and closed the door behind them.

His feet were now free, but in no other way was his situation improved. The cellar was pitch-dark and dank. After a few minutes the earl struggled to his feet and cautiously paced out his new prison. A few steps in any direction brought him stumbling against what he took to be barrels or casks. He had already seen that the door was uncharacteristically solid compared to the rotten and skewed structure of which he had caught a glimpse. If there were wine or spirits in the cellar, that was not surprising.

The pain of the circulation returning in his feet drove him to sit down again. It caused the earl some alarm to realize that there was no sensation in his hands, still bound behind his back. He twisted his wrists within the ropes, gained a marginal release of the

pressure against them at the expense of a tightening of the knots which held them, and was rewarded by pain in his hands as well. He stood and paced in the dark, and sat, and stood again at intervals, listening to the rats scuttling around him. It was not a pleasant afternoon.

Mr. Newcombe was perturbed. It was not until he rose in the morning that the butler Ives informed him that his lordship was not yet returned. At first, Newcombe attempted to reassure himself with the reflection that the earl could hardly be said to have abandoned his practise of all-night carouses and might be engaged in some relatively unobjectionable pursuits of his own, but the effort was unavailing. In light of Nell Kelly's sinister warning, Newcombe soon abandoned such comforting reflections and gave himself up to all the agitation of picturing his employer in the direst extremity of danger, or already dead.

Newcombe's first impulse was to fly to Bow Street and invoke all the resources of the law to rescue his lordship from his supposed abductors. But then the thought of the previous day's dubious activities gave him pause. If it should turn out that the earl's absence was innocent, it would be the height of folly to call the attention of the guardians of the law to his lordship's acquaintance with Black Billy. To enforce conviction on the runners that there was a real likelihood the earl was in the hands of that terrible figure, it would be necessary to reveal certain connections which might bring suspicion to bear on the earl and on Newcombe himself.

The secretary remained in wretched indecision. He sent to inquire at all the clubs and fashionable gathering places, to discover whether the earl might have been seen. He even went so far as to seek intelligence of a certain famous opera dancer, but her response was spitefully to repudiate that she would even recognize the earl, since he had not been near her in some weeks. So although the fashionable world was thus alerted to the earl's absence, no positive information was obtained.

Now thoroughly alarmed, Newcombe revolved over and over

within himself the arguments for and against invoking the aid of the law. He remained miserably at his post, like a sentinel who suspects that his force's patrols have all been overwhelmed by the enemy, and thus it was, that when Rotherham, alarmed by the buzz of speculation in the clubs, came to ask after his lordship's whereabouts, his alarms were instantly confirmed at the sight of Newcombe's face.

Henry Newcombe's fortitude was not proof against the solicitude of a friend.

“Mr. Rotherham, I fear the worst,” he said. “It is quite certain that his lordship is in the hands of a ruthless scoundrel, if not already dead. I cannot flatter myself otherwise.”

“Good God!” Rotherham said. “Why have you not called in the Bow Street runners at once?”

“Sir, I cannot – there are circumstances – it would be quite ruinous, I assure you.”

“Mr. Newcombe, I perceive your judgement has been overset. What could be worse than Jack lying dead?”

Newcombe's face plainly revealed his embarrassment.

“I cannot call in the runners,” he repeated. “Pray take my word for it, sir. I give you my solemn word, I cannot call in the runners.”

Rotherham was confused but undefeated.

“Who is his lordship's enemy?”

“His name is Black Billy.”

“What?”

“Sir, I have never seen the rogue, and I do not precisely comprehend the grounds of his enmity, nor even who or what he is,

but I do know the earl has been warned that this Black Billy intends him grievous harm. I think he is the leader of a gang of thieves and cutthroats. Certainly he has followers whom he has set the task of seeking out his lordship. And as certain is it that his lordship has not been seen by anyone, that I can discover, since yesterday evening.”

“But have you no notion where this Black Billy can be found?”

Newcombe looked yet more miserable.

“Not the slightest, Mr. Rotherham. It is the most inconceivable oversight not to have asked the person who came to warn his lordship, where Black Billy could be found, or how to remain in communication. How can I ever forgive myself such monumental stupidity?”

“Mr. Newcombe, we have not to lament over previous inconsideration, but to find the earl! Even if we must seek at random, it is better than inaction.”

Ives appeared at the door. Newcombe made an impatient gesture, as if to wave away all distractions, but Ives stood his ground and announced stolidly,

“Mistress Nell Kelly, sir.” Before Newcombe could speak Nell burst into the room.

Those inclined to ponder the foibles of mankind might have derived considerable amusement from a study of Mr. Rotherham's face as he caught sight of this new ally. Newcombe, however, had no time to spare for such frivolous considerations.

“Oh, sir, they've got Mr. Warwick,” Nell said.

“Is he still alive?” Newcombe said.

“Aye, and unhurt barring a bump on the head, from what I heard Ned saying to Peter.”



“Thank God,” Newcombe said. “But where is he, and what is it Black Billy plans to do?”

“What Black Billy plans nobody knows,” Nell said. “But I know where Mr. Warwick is. I overheard them boasting of it. He's in the cellar at the Sail and Hammer.”

“Can you lead us there?”

“Aye,” said Nell. “But it's as full as it can hold of Black Billy's gang. We'll never get Mr. Warwick out with just the two of us.”

“Three of us, madam,” Rotherham said. “But why is he calling himself Mr. Warwick?”

“Ain't that his right name, sir?” Nell asked.

“Oh, yes, that is his name, but—”

“Never mind all that,” Newcombe said. “Let us be going to his assistance, instantly.”

“We'll see how many pistols we can muster first,” Rotherham said grimly.

## **Chapter 25**

The same two ruffians came for him at last, and marched him out of the cellar, up another flight of stairs and into a dingy parlour. The earl was not surprised to see that night had fallen, for it seemed an endless age he had been left in the cellar. He had but little attention for wondering what o'clock it was, however, for Black Billy was lounging in a chair before him, peeling an apple with his pocket knife.

“I'll wager you'll not sneer at me now, Mr. Warwick,” Black Billy

said. The earl was silent. "Cut him loose," said the gang leader. One of his followers again produced his knife, cut the ropes and thrust the earl down onto one of the rickety stools with which the room was provided. "Out," Black Billy commanded. The other two thieves left the room.

The earl rubbed his lacerated wrists, wincing as he did so. Black Billy munched on his apple, surveying his prisoner.

"Why don't you beg for your life, Mr. Warwick?" he said.

"I would not be still in possession of it, had you intended to murder me," the earl said, as coolly as he could. He had not eaten in four-and-twenty hours, and was keenly aware of the smell of the apple. "Perhaps you might enlighten me as to what you do intend."

"Well, I *was* going to have your throat cut," Black Billy said. "But then I found out something that made me think I'd be better off bleeding your pockets than your hide."

"And what was it you found out?" the earl enquired.

"Why, only that you took Dick Gamble to the docks to take ship to Ireland."

"You have many pairs of eyes working for you," the earl said.

"I do indeed."

"But, still, it seems like to me that your power does not extend across the sea. Dick will be well vanished before you can set any spies to work to trace him."

"Why, Mr. Warwick, it's no matter to me if Dick disappears. I wanted him out of the way, but in Ireland or in Hell, it's all the same to me. But, sure, the runners would prick up their ears if they heard you was the one got Dick out of Newgate."

There was a moment's silence.

“So I'm to buy your discretion, I suppose,” the earl said.

“I thought you was a fly cove. That's it exactly.”

“And what is the price?”

“The first se'night costs ten guineas. I don't know what the next one costs. I'll have to inquire how fat your purse is.”

The earl did not reply. He found the prospect of being blackmailed for life not at all to his liking, but he could see no immediate alternative. The tack he found most congenial, damning the consequences and trusting to his superior credibility, was clearly too risky. However unlikely they found it, and whatever counter-charges he laid against his accusers, it was most improbable that the minions of the law would entirely refrain from investigating his connection with Dick Gamble's escape, and not only his own safety, but that of Amelia, Miss Smythe and Henry Newcombe lay also in the balance.

The earl pondered so intently as to be at first unconscious of a tumult in the lower part of the house. Not until there came a clattering of footsteps on the stairway and shouts outside the door, did he awaken to the fact that Black Billy had leaped to his feet, cursing. The door was flung open and Rotherham, Newcombe and Nell Kelly came crashing in, with one of the earl's own footmen bringing up the rear.

“Hello, Henry,” the earl said calmly. “Ah, Rotherham, et tu? Pray, lower your pistols, gentlemen, I had rather not receive a ball by accident.”

“My lord, are you hurt?” Newcombe said.

“Not at all, sir. I fear you must have been more agitated than the situation warranted.”

“My lord, there's no need to dissemble,” Rotherham said, since

Henry Newcombe was apparently rendered speechless. “We have secured the whole house. The rogues have all run off or are under your servants' guns, barring one poor wretch lying delirious in a fever.”

“I'll pay you back for this, you jade!” Black Billy said. Nell shrank away from him.

“Oh, no, Billy, I think whatever the outcome of our negotiations, I shall be compelled to take Mistress Nell off your hands,” the earl said. “It's you, Nell, I suppose, who summoned all these loyal forces.”

“I'm very glad to see you ain't been thrown in the river, sir,” Nell said. “Sure, I brought the gentlemen.”

“Thank you, madam, on both counts,” the earl said.

“This is Black Billy, is it?” Rotherham said. “Shall I rid the world of his contaminating presence?”

The earl looked shocked.

“Rotherham, you wouldn't murder a man in cold blood, only because he is a bit of a rascal?” he said. Rotherham lowered the point of his pistol.

“No, I suppose not,” he said. “Although if we'd found you in any way injured, it would be another matter.”

“Sir, I am moved at your tenderness towards me,” said the earl. “But you have grievously misjudged Mr. Thurl's motives.”

“Let us call in the Watch, at least,” Rotherham persisted. “You cannot let him go unpunished.”

“But I assure you, sir, I have no complaint to make against him,” the earl said. “We were considering matters of business.” Then as his friends continued sceptical, he said, “In fact, Black Billy has an

informant who saw me with Dick by the river yesterday.”

“Sure, it was you then that got poor Dick out of Newgate?” Nell said admiringly.

“Out of Newgate!” Rotherham said. “Who is Dick?”

“My part in his escape was but a humble one, Mistress Nell,” the earl said.

“Escape?” Rotherham said, now looking utterly bewildered.

“But you must perceive, Henry, that it is inconvenient that Black Billy should be so well informed,” the earl said. “I confess I have not yet hit upon any tactic but to accede to his terms.”

“My lord, I insist you explain,” Rotherham said. “What is going on here?”

“My lord?” said Black Billy, as surprised as Rotherham, as it dawned upon him that the phrase was not an expletive but a form of address.

“Oh, sir, if once you pay Black Billy not to spill to the runners, you'll never have done with him,” Nell said earnestly. “I've seen him before when he had someone in his clutches. I could tell you stories would make your blood run cold.”

“Uh, no need, Nell,” said the earl. “Mr. Thurl, since my friends have been at some pains to come for me, I think I would be remiss not to accompany them now. I trust it will satisfy you if I give you my word to return you an answer to your proposition within two days from now?”

Black Billy, assured he was in no danger of summary execution, bowed his acquiescence with commendable aplomb.

“Very good, my lord,” he said.

“My lord?” said Nell, bewildered.

“Why, yes, Nell,” said the earl apologetically. “I am afraid I have hitherto met you under false pretences.”

Nell did not quite catch his meaning, but the earl bowed her out of the room before she could question him further. Newcombe and Rotherham followed, the latter scowling fiercely at Black Billy and flourishing his pistol suggestively.

They made their way through a warren of rooms, reassembling their forces as they went. The earl was enlivened to discover that his groom, a stable boy, both his footmen, all of his postilions and his valet had been impressed into service for the occasion.

“I confess I never before considered how much of the makings of a mob I had under my own roof,” he murmured to his friend. Rotherham looked pained.

The earl came last of all to a miserable apartment, hardly larger than the closet in which he had been first confined. The fever victim lay twitching and muttering. The earl took the candle from Nell's hand and leaned over him.

“Sulky,” he said. He looked up at Rotherham. “We must carry this poor fellow away to somewhere that he can receive some assistance,” he said.

“My lord, consider the danger. We know not if his complaint be contagious. He may die at any rate.”

“Rotherham, I know this man, I have drunk to his brother's memory with him. I cannot leave the wretch in this hovel, without aid or comfort.” Two of his servants were summoned to carry the delirious Sulky out of the house and into his lordship's carriage.

“Henry, do you take this poor fellow and Mistress Nell home, and see them both installed with every possible comfort,” the earl said. “A doctor for Sulky, and a brandy for Nell.”

“Yes, my lord,” Newcombe said, too overwhelmed to protest.  
“What is it you next intend?”

A look of heartfelt urgency came over the earl's face.

“Dinner,” he said.

## **Chapter 26**

“My lord, I must insist upon some explanation,” Rotherham said as they entered a private room in the Crown and Anchor.

“Sir, I cannot answer you without sustenance,” the earl said.  
“Come, boy, bring me bread and cheese immediately, I'll choose my dinner after that.” The earl flung himself into a chair and seized upon a dish of fruit reposing upon the table. The waiter was soon in the room again with the rude provisions demanded of him, and the earl then ordered a prodigious feast.

“I trust you will dine with me, sir?” said the earl.

“I have dined already,” Rotherham said with some asperity.

“But you cannot refuse to bear me company, Rotherham. Come, sit down, we have the whole evening before us! Unless you have some other engagement?”

“I have no other engagement.”

“Splendid!” said the earl. “What's said in the clubs of Howe's fleet? I have been unavoidably prevented from hearing any news today.”

“The fleet is all submerged—”

“Submerged!”

“— In the mystery of what had become of the Earl of Creasy, my lord.”

“Damn!” said the earl. “I had particularly wished to avoid any éclat to my proceedings just at present.”

“So I perceive, my lord,” said Rotherham dryly, but he was prevented from pressing his enquiries by the nigh continuous attendance of the waiters. His lordship maintained a flow of impersonal chat as he wrought mightily upon two full courses, compelling Rotherham to answer in a like vein, and to partake also of boiled cod, roast beef, pigeons and sundry other dishes. Finally the board was cleared, the brandy set on the table and the waiters dismissed.

“My lord, you have not answered me,” Rotherham said. “Who is this Black Billy, and how came you to fall foul of him? What is it he wanted of you? How could you have been in company with that poor wretch who now lies in a fever? And who is this Dick and what did he do to end in Newgate? And can you really have been so lost to all sense of your position as to enable him to escape?”

The earl laughed.

“Gently, sir. For the love you bear me, Rotherham, I beg you not to press me further. 'Tis from my love for you I will not tell you. There are secrets that are more inconvenient than interesting to know.”

“But, my lord, you cannot conceal from me that that scoundrel holds some power over you. What will you do?”

“I can tell you nothing on that matter, either, sir, for I have not yet taken any decision. If nothing else your dramatic rescue has purchased me two days' grace to consider of it.” The earl looked gravely at his friend. “I made light of it in Black Billy's presence, but I am much in your debt, sir.” Rotherham made an impatient



gesture as if to dismiss his lordship's thanks. "No, indeed, Rotherham, I am very deeply obliged to you for your assistance. So much so that I hardly know how to confess that I must be so disobliging as to cry off from my engagement at your house to meet that young lady you spoke of."

"Miss Loftus?"

"Was that the name?" said the earl ingenuously. "But I know you are too good to resent my defection. All these other matters will require my absence, I fear."

"That is no matter," Rotherham said. "Jack, is there not some further way in which I can assist you?"

"Be assured, I will not hesitate to require it of you, if I find the need arises," the earl said. "I'm sure I do not deserve to have so good a friend as you."

Rotherham repeated his dismissive gesture.

"And so am I sure that without your wild scrapes I would not otherwise have passed half so entertaining a day," he said.

A knock on the door preceded the waiter.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but would you be Mr. Warwick, sir?" the menial asked.

"Yes," said the earl, casting a repressive glance at his friend.

"There's a letter come for you this afternoon, sir. I beg pardon for not bringing it to you earlier, but I didn't know you was Mr. Warwick, sir."

The earl caught up the letter and broke it hastily open. Rotherham could see only that it was a lengthy missive, the enclosed sheet and the envelope both written full and partly crossed, and that in what seemed a lady's hand. The earl seemed much moved by what he

read, for he frowned and swore under his breath as he perused it. When at length he looked up at Rotherham he smiled ruefully and said,

“Again I must beg your pardon, sir. I find I have not quite come to the end of what I must do tonight. Waiter, bring me pen, ink and paper.”

“Shall I leave you then, my lord?” said Rotherham.

“I fear I must have you do so,” said the earl. “If it is ever in my power to break my silence you shall have the whole fantastic story, I promise you.”

Rotherham departed with no more than a hearty handshake. The earl forthwith sat down, wrote two letters, enclosed one within the other, sealed them up, and ordered that the whole should be sent by messenger immediately. He then returned to his own home, not without a few timorous glances whenever any other pedestrian passed him, and sought out his long-suffering secretary.

“Well, Henry, I hope you are now in a less agitated frame of mind,” he said.

“My lord, you may make light of it, but I cannot but offer the most fervent thanksgiving for your safety.”

“Thank you, Henry, but I think you had best change it to entreaty for your own. We are not yet free and clear.”

“What's amiss, my lord?”

“I have had a letter from Miss Loftus. The runner came to interview her today.”

“So soon!”

“Aye, I fear we have a more intelligent opponent than we had bargained for. Here, you may look over her letter. I think Miss

Loftus has behaved just as she ought, but you see the runner has asked to see Miss Smythe and will not long be put off. If he have the wit to bring the gatekeeper to identify her, and realizes that she was 'Mrs. Cuthbert', our strategm will be quite exposed."

"My lord! What can we do?"

"We must get Miss Smythe out of the way, and I think you would be the safer further from London as well, Henry. I have written already to Miss Loftus and to Miss Smythe to arrange it. You shall go at first light tomorrow and escort Miss Smythe to Cheswick, where you must both remain at least a fortnight, and better a month. The letter to Miss Smythe is for the benefit of the public, wherein she is offered a position of governess if she can make herself available immediately. If it weren't for this accursed war, I'd send her out of the country entirely. But Cheswick should, I hope, be far enough."

"And if the runner follows her there?" Newcombe said doubtfully.

"Lord, I don't know! We will have to come up with yet another story. The main object is to ensure that enough time passes before any exposure, that we may plausibly argue that the gatekeeper's memory is at fault. He saw Miss Smythe, he saw Mrs. Cuthbert, he has confused the two – 'twill wash after a month, but not after a day. Whatever defers it, we must do. So you shall remain there with Miss Smythe as long as necessary. And if the runners do come, keep out of their sight, I beg you. If you are recognized it will be all up with the lot of us."

"My lord, I do not like to leave you at such a time. What will you do about Black Billy?"

"I don't know," said the earl. "But go you must. Black Billy I shall have to deal with on my own."

"Your upper servants also, my lord," said Newcombe. "Both Ives and Mrs. Manson have expressed some misgivings about waiting upon your guests, my lord."

“Nell and Sulky – Good Lord, if I had not forgotten about them. Well, I hope I can make some provision to get them safely out of the way within a day or two. What a tangle!”

“I pray, my lord, the next time you meet with a highwayman, you will hand over your purse and ride the opposite way as fast as you can.”

“Amen, Henry, amen.”

Newcombe repaired to his chamber to prepare for his next day's journey. His lordship repaired to his chamber to ponder on the many ways in which it had pleased Providence to show him up for a fool.

He should have had nothing to do with Dick Gamble. He should not have antagonized Black Billy. He should have left Miss Loftus to suffer the consequences of her own folly. He should certainly have hired a coach, and not used one of his own for his little adventure. And he should not be permitting the image of Amelia, giving fervent thanks for his safety, or sitting so competently astride her horse, to intrude itself upon his consciousness, when so many other more serious matters should have engrossed him.

## **Chapter 27**

“Gone?” Mrs. Catchlove said. “But how should she be gone?”

“I have already explained it to you, aunt,” Amelia said. “One of Miss Smythe's friends was able to recommend her for a most eligible post, as governess to two young ladies in Cambridgeshire, but only on condition that she was willing to take up the position immediately, and as there was a gentleman who is intimate with the family to whom she is going, who was willing to escort her this morning, she has already departed.”

“Pon my faith, 'tis a prodigious hurry they must be in, to have poor Miss Smythe dragged away without so much as a farewell breakfast. You would think the young ladies might live a day longer without a governess,” Mrs. Catchlove said.

“Indeed, Miss Smythe was very sorry to leave without an opportunity to thank you, aunt,” Amelia said, looking quite as conscious of this social lapse as she felt. “But the offer came last night when you were already abed and Miss Smythe was obliged to be ready at eight o'clock this morning. She has left a letter of thanks for you.” Amelia here tendered the letter.

“Why, yes, 'tis a very pretty letter. I am sure I do not blame Miss Smythe. But what an odd family these Greenhams must be! Two daughters, she says, aged twelve and nine. Well, I hope Miss Smythe will be content with 'em, but if she is not, why she may come back here with my hearty good-will, and so you may write to her, my dear.”

“Yes, dear aunt, and so I will! But I hope this great haste is their only eccentricity, and that Miss Smythe will be happy. I am very sorry to part with her myself, but if it is for her benefit I must try not to be so selfish as to repine.”

“Well, you may have enough to occupy yourself with to have no time for repining, Amelia, if you will bend your mind to getting a husband as you ought.”

Amelia could not forbear a great sigh. She was glad at least that her aunt for once made no more forthright reference to Sir Lancelot, but the notion of matrimony seemed somehow very oppressive to her today. Also she wished her aunt might have been awake, to see the letter so craftily provided and to be a further witness to the motive of Miss Smythe's departure, but that was beyond hoping for. She could only hope that Mr. North would consider the whole matter in the proper light.

“'Tis a pity, miss,” said he, somewhat later that morning when she

had repeated her explanation of Miss Smythe's absence. "Tis a great pity. We might have cleared up one or two little questions once and for all. But I suppose it's not to be expected Miss Smythe should hesitate to close with such advantageous proposals."

"Oh, no" Amelia agreed. "It seems a very advantageous position, and she could hardly think of refusing, for she has no other source of income whatsoever, you know, and this post is worth quite half again as much as my father paid her. I am sorry to lose Miss Smythe, but I must rejoice for her sake."

"And where is it she is gone?"

"Ely, in Cambridgeshire," Amelia said. "That is, I am not quite certain if it is in the town or some way out of it. We were in such a commotion to get all her preparations made in time, I did not quite attend. But she will write to me by the first post, surely, and then I shall know as much as she can tell."

"Surely, miss," Mr. North agreed. "And then you will be able to furnish me her exact direction so that we may pursue our enquiries."

"Of course, sir. But is it entirely necessary? I have told you as much about – about visiting Newgate as Miss Smythe could tell, and imagine what this new family may think of her, if almost their first impression is formed by her having to answer enquiries! She was not even in London when Sir Lancelot and I encountered the highwayman, you know, so she cannot help you to find him. Must you really pursue this business of our visit to the gaol? I'm sure I would never have made Miss Smythe go had I known how serious an error it was to pretend to be a criminal's cousin. I beg you, Mr. North, can you not let the matter rest?"

Seeing Amelia becoming agitated, Mr. North said soothingly,

"Well, miss, we may not even need to speak to Miss Smythe. Ely in Cambridgeshire, that's two days' journey. I'm sure if we can satisfy our curiosity in London there'll be no need to go so far."

“Then, pray, if there is anything else, do ask it of me now,” Amelia said.

“Why, no, miss, there's nothing further for now. It's other folk we hope can help us. Don't you be worried about Miss Smythe's position – we can be as discreet as never you mind.”

“Oh, Mr. North, I am sure you can. Indeed, you have been so by me, and I am truly much obliged to you.”

Mr. North took his leave. Amelia was quite astonished to think how hardened she was become, for she ought to have trembled to hear how boldly she had answered the runner. Her dismay was, however, somewhat tempered by her self-congratulation on how well she had been able to account for her inevitable confusion with unexceptionable motives for it. That had been a very good notion of Mr. Warwick's, that she should pretend to be overcome by remorse for a minor lie whenever she felt herself unequal to the task of smoothly carrying off a major one. It was almost as crafty as his master-stroke, that she should pretend to ruffled vanity at having her charity rebuffed to give plausibility to the idea that she was in ignorance of Dick's escape.

Amelia sighed again. She could not but admit to herself that Mr. Warwick's invaluable assistance showed a certain cynicism concerning human nature, and that what he knew of her own behaviour was not likely to raise the general condition in his esteem.

Mr. North was not as satisfied as Amelia with the event of the latest discussion. He emerged slowly from Mrs. Catchlove's house, and dismissed the Newgate warder, who was waiting with George Haskell.

“That young lady is either completely innocent or a most impudent liar,” he said to his faithful assistant. “And damme if I can tell which!”

“What about the governess, Mr. North?” Georgie Haskell said.

“It seems she's gone down into Cambridgeshire to take up a new post. On the face of it, 'tis plausible enough. Only I do not like so many coincidences.”

“Nor I,” said Georgie. “Here's the young lady and her governess have been in disguise to see Dick Gamble the very day he disappears after seeing him arrested. That might just be coincidence and it might not. Then there's this Mr. Tilly, who we can't find no more than the Man in the Moon, who was there at the same time. Then there's Mrs. Cuthbert, who meets her friend Mr. Tilly in the gaol yard – there's another coincidence. Then there's the odd business how Mrs. Cuthbert was seen to come out but disremembered to go in, and now she seems to have disappeared also. That's a third coincidence. If we could find some link between the first pair of visitors and the second we'd be getting somewhere.”

“Have you discovered anything about this Mrs. Cuthbert?” Mr. North asked. “If we can only find something out about the second pair, we might not need Miss Loftus nor Miss Smythe.”

“Aye. The warder is no great hand at reading, but he remembered the signature on Mrs. Cuthbert's letter of introduction. 'Twas from Mr. Jessup, the magistrate. So I just went along and asked him, and it seems as he don't know the lady himself. He wrote her that letter to oblige the Earl of Creasy.”

“The Earl of Creasy!” Mr. North said. “How comes his lordship into it?”

“That I can't tell you, Mr. North. Nor I can't find this Mr. Warwick, who visited Dick Gamble twice, the day after he was arrested, and in the morning before he escaped.”

“Oh, I doubt Mr. Warwick, whoever he may be, has aught to do with it. The warders were all quite positive in their testimony he left Newgate hours before Dick disappeared.”



“I'm bound to say I don't see how it was done,” Mr. Haskell said.  
“What do we do next, Mr. North?”

“Next we calls upon his lordship, the Earl of Creasy. A lord!  
Fancy how Mrs. North will gape to know I've been to see a lord.”

“Is he a high-up lord, Mr. North?”

“I don't rightly know,” Mr. North admitted. “But that don't make  
no never mind. There's books where you can look up all about the  
nobility, and we'll find him in there, right enough.”

The two runners repaired to consult one of these valuable volumes.  
Mr. Haskell having turned the pages with deliberate care, came to  
the relevant entry at last. He muttered over the lines laboriously  
with the assistance of a finger proceeding across the page, calling  
out items of interest to Mr. North.

“Present earl - fourteenth Earl of Creasy—”

“Fourteenth!” Mr. North said. “They must have come over with  
the Conqueror.”

“Baron Ely,” Mr. Haskell continued.

“Ely!” Mr. North exclaimed.

“John Edmund Howard Warwick – principal seat Cheswick in  
Cambridgeshire,” Mr. Haskell said.

Mr. North uttered a queer noise, between a snort and a grunt.

“Warwick,” he said. “And Miss Smythe has gone down to Ely in  
Cambridgeshire.”

“Fancy that!” Mr. Haskell said ironically. “Such a fine crop of  
coincidences I'm sure I never did see!”

“We'll see his lordship without more ado,” said Mr. North. “I'll stake my new wig we'll make him look no-how.”

## Chapter 28

It did not require Mr. North's presence to disturb the placid tenor of the earl's existence.

“I beg your pardon, my lord, but how would you wish Mistress Kelly to be served her dinner?” Ives said, in a manner in which long suffering was but thinly overlaid with a woodenness of countenance befitting his dignity.

“Why, in the dining room, Ives,” said the earl abstractly, still pondering the problem of what he was to say to Black Billy on the morrow.

“My lord, it is not fitting!” Mrs. Manson said. “You will not sit down to your dinner with such a person as that?”

“Would you prefer to entertain Mistress Kelly at your own table, Mrs. Manson?” the earl enquired. Mrs. Manson blanched.

“Three generations we have served your lordship's family, and I never saw such goings-on,” she declared, heedless of Ives attempts to check her indignation. “I'm sure I never thought to leave your lordship's service, but sit down at table with that hussy I will not!”

“Since I am not bound by such a nice code of honour, and have no objection to sit with Mistress Kelly, we are agreed then,” the earl responded.

“My lord, I cannot sit idly by, while the lower servants are contaminated by the presence of a- of a—”

“Lady of the evening?” the earl suggested. “Light skirt? Bit of

muslin? Hay-market ware? Fille de joie? Har—”

“I must beg to give my notice, my lord,” Mrs. Manson interrupted.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Manson,” the earl said. “Be assured you shall have my every assistance, and a letter of the most hearty recommendation.”

Mrs. Manson's face screwed up.

“Oh, my lord, I did not mean it! I cannot leave you! I hope to see my descendants still in your service, my lord.”

“Mrs. Manson, I am flattered,” said the earl. “Come, I am sensible of what a trial to your nice principles Mistress Kelly's presence must be, and I am sorry for it. But whatever she has been, she has done me inestimable service, and I could not be acquitted by my own conscience if I cast her off now. 'Tis only for a day or two, I promise you, until I can contrive some more suitable refuge for her.”

“Very good, my lord,” Ives said, choosing thus to terminate the discussion. “But about the other person?”

“Sulky? What says the doctor of him?”

“That he is certainly obliged to your lordship for his preservation,” Ives replied.

“Is he out of danger, then?”

“So Doctor Osgood asserts,” Ives said. “I confess I cannot perceive any improvement. The patient is yet delirious. Dr. Osgood declares, however, that the danger of contagion is past, that there will certainly be a crisis by tonight and that tomorrow should show a pronounced emendation in the patient.”

“I am greatly relieved to hear it,” said the earl. “Poor Sulky will be much gratified to live to be hanged, I am sure.”

Since this pleasantry met not with Ives' approval, and since Mrs. Manson seemed also restored to all her original agitation, the earl dismissed them hastily.

“Strooth,” he muttered. “I never expected so many complications.” He passed in rapid review all the manoeuvres and expedients which had been forced upon him, and all the difficulties yet hanging over him, since his ill-advised acquaintance with Dick Gamble. He was not only forced to treat with a genuinely sinister rogue, but he was in the curious position of dancing attendance on a Yorkshire squire's daughter, obeying all her most outrageous behests to save her from a greater folly. “I'd have done better to let her marry Sir Lancelot as she threatened,” he growled to himself, but with a curious revulsion of feeling he repudiated his own assertion. He could only hope to break through to some resolution where he could take up the more conventional deportment which had seldom seemed so appealing to him as it did now.

He had reached this unsatisfactory point in his musings when Ives once more intruded upon his solitude.

“A Mr. North to see you, my lord.”

“North. I do not believe he is known to me.”

“From the Bow Street runners, my lord.”

The earl grimaced.

“Pray conduct him, I will see him immediately.” He had barely time to smooth his countenance before the runner was before him.

“I'm sure it's very good of your lordship to see me so promptly,” said Mr. North. The earl regarded him with frank appraisal.

“I confess to a degree of curiosity to know what a runner is like, sir,” he said in his most engagingly open manner. “Also to know how I may be of use to you.”

“Well, my lord, it concerns an odd acquaintance of yours. Or rather several odd acquaintances.”

“I have a wide acquaintance, sir.”

“I'll not gainsay that, my lord,” Mr. North agreed. “For to my certain knowledge it includes a highwayman, a lady who has presided over a gambling hell and an obscure governess who has until a few days ago resided in Yorkshire.”

“Why, yes, I do know a highwayman. You refer to Dick Gamble, I presume. I have been twice to see the poor fellow in prison, and intended to go again today. I confess I did not think to come to your notice, as I did not use any titles in my dealings with Newgate. I had thought myself wondrous discrete, but you have been too much for me. Is it about Dick that you wished to question me?”

“Well, in a way, my lord. It do seem rather odd for a noble gentleman such as yourself to pay any heed to one wretch more awaiting his trial, and I am curious how you came to know Dick.”

The earl smiled.

“I hope you will excuse me from giving you any particulars. I should not like to implicate others. Will it satisfy you if I say simply that I have an uncontrollable predilection for low company? Since Dick has never robbed me, I have no reason not to wish him well, and if he is found guilty I hope to use what interest I have to save him.” The earl allowed a sudden revelation of his alarm to appear through his urbanity. “I trust, Mr. North, what I have said will not prejudice the outcome of Dick's trial. You are not here to trick me into betraying him, I hope.”

“Oh, no, my lord, Dick Gamble's trial is quite a separate matter,” Mr. North said, studying the earl in his turn. “What of Mrs. Cuthbert?”

“I do indeed know Mrs. Cuthbert,” the earl said, infusing a little perplexity into his voice and manner. “We have been acquainted these ten years, although we have never been intimate.”

“And yet you procured her an introduction into Newgate,” North said. The earl smiled, as if his confusion were now done away with.

“Yes, I did. I happened to call on Mrs. Cuthbert after I had first been to see Dick, and mentioned it to her. She professed a curiosity to see what the new building was like, so I procured her a letter from Mr. Jessup, the magistrate.”

“On the very next day,” Mr. North said.

“Yes, sir.” The earl now permitted himself a return of his bewilderment. “But, sir, I cannot perceive why you should interest yourself in Mrs. Cuthbert. She has led a most exemplary existence these five years and more. Her wishing to see Newgate is no greater reflection upon her than mine is upon me, I can assure you of that.”

“Oh, I am sure there's no more guilt in one case than the other,” Mr. North agreed.

“Might I inquire in what direction this investigation is tending? I have first met Dick Gamble in low haunts, but I can give you no evidence against him, you know. I never asked any particulars of his activities.”

“Well, my lord, perhaps we might first clear up the matter of the governess,” Mr. North demurred. “A Miss Smythe, my lord, late of Yorkshire.”

“You have me there, Mr. North. I cannot call to mind any such person. I may perhaps have met with her in company, but not attended to the name.”

“You admit to no acquaintance with Miss Smythe, my lord?”

“It as as I have said. Governesses are sometimes included in drawing room gatherings after dinner, but generally only if there is a great deal of company, and when her charges are there also. Perhaps she is in the employ of some family of my acquaintance?”

“I am given to understand that she has just this morning gone down to a new situation at Ely in Cambridgeshire, my lord.”

“I have an estate near there,” the earl offered ingenuously. “When I am next in the neighbourhood, it is not unthinkable that I might encounter this person and then I may consider whether I can call to mind having met her previously. But for now I fear I can tell you nothing. I am not much accustomed to bestowing any great observation upon governesses.”

“Can you tell me at least where Mrs. Cuthbert is to be found?”

“She lodges in Orford Street, sir.”

“But she is not a present in residence, my lord.”

“Oh? Then I suppose that she has gone on a visit somewhere.”

“And can you assist me to discover where she has gone?”

“I fear I cannot. I believe she has several times gone on visits, but we are not very intimate, as I told you before, and she has never divulged where or to whom she goes,” the earl said. “I suspect it may be to some obscure relations of which she does not like to boast. She now lives in a rather higher circle than she began in, but I have no reason to suspect she has severed all connection with her origins. She has never made a secret of her career. Indeed she could not, when her gaming establishment was so well known to so many.”

“Thank you, my lord. I am sure you have done your best,” Mr. North said temperately.

“Have you done with questioning me?” said the earl.

“For now, my lord,” said Mr. North. The earl appeared to expect something more, but Mr. North said nothing.

“Will you not tell me what is the purpose of your enquiries?” asked the earl. “I confess I cannot guess their interconnection.”

“I think I would do better to remain silent on that score, my lord.”

“I must possess my soul in patience then,” said the earl. “But on one point I do beg you will advise me candidly. Will it in any way worsen Dick's prospect of an acquittal if I visit him any more? I do not like to leave him friendless, but I would sooner be unkind now than impair his safety.”

“Oh, no, my lord, I doubt your visits will have any material effect on Dick, for better or worse,” Mr. North said. “Your servant, my lord.”

Mr. North joined Mr. Haskell in the street.

“Well, Georgie, how have you done?”

“There's a devilish pretty chambermaid in that house,” Mr. Haskell replied.

“Is it so? I know you have a way with females. How did you fare?”

“It seems my lord has two rogues staying in the house with him, a man and a woman. The man is kept to his bed by fever, but the woman, 'tis said, he even dines with.”

“Hmm,” said Mr. North

“'Tis an odd start,” Mr. Haskell offered.

“His lordship does appear to favour low company,” Mr. North



agreed.

“What do you make of him, sir?”

“Why, Georgie, that's hard to say exactly. I'd take my oath he's one of the wild ones, consorting with criminals. He's broken the peace in his day, I've no doubt. But he seems friendly and open enough. If he had any notion what I was about he kept it well hidden. He's our Mr. Warwick well enough. He makes no denial he's the one visited Dick. And he was quite open how he'd got this Mrs. Cuthbert her letter from Mr. Jessup. But Miss Smythe he denies. He offered to visit Dick again in Newgate, too.”

“Well, we might see whether he makes the attempt,” Mr. Haskell said. He frowned. “There was one other odd bit I came across. It seems that two days ago the earl took it into his head to drive his coach himself, without coachman or any other servants. And with no coat of arms on the doors of it, neither.”

“Would that have been around four or five o'clock in the evening?”

“It seems it was. He took his coach out at three and brought it back at six. Another coincidence, do you think, sir?”

“I think it's time to lay all these coincidences before Mr. Jessup, Georgie.”

The two runners hastened to do so, but their devotion was frustrated. Mr. Jessup was from home, and not expected back until the morrow.

“Well, I doubt one day will make no difference,” Mr. North said philosophically. “If I can get our witness to Ely, and find this Miss Smythe, any time in the week will do.”

The earl, meanwhile, after considering of his interview with the runner, sat down to pen two lengthy reports. To Henry Newcombe, he emphasized the danger of Miss Smythe being discovered by the resourceful Mr. North, and demanded of his secretary that he

endeavour to find some way of accounting for the non-existence of Miss Smythe's new employers. To Amelia he wrote soberly adjuring her to take the greatest care to conceal any knowledge of Mr. Warwick. Then he betook himself to Newgate, where he enacted a very gratifying scene of wonder and amazement at Dick's absence, in which an improper though natural satisfaction could be detected at the idea that his friend had thus frustrated the ends of justice. He prolonged this performance until the guards were sufficiently exasperated at the impertinence of his exclamations and questions, that he felt quite secure Mr. North would have no difficulty in discovering that he had indeed innocently sought Dick in prison two days after his escape.

The earl returned to his dinner fairly satisfied with his day's labours.

"How do you do, Mistress Nell," he said, as she joined him in the dining room. To his surprise, Nell screwed up her face in token of dissatisfaction.

"Oh, Mr. Warwick – I mean, my lord – I'm sure it's very kind of you to have me here, but I don't fancy staying. It wouldn't be proper-like. And then your servants are all so queer, as if they think themselves so much better than me. I'm sure Mrs. Manson would as lief turn me out into the streets. But then, I don't know where I'm to go. For sure as sin, Black Billy will be on me if ever I set foot out of the door. Oh, Mr. Warwick – my lord – where am I to go?"

"Never fear, Nell, I will find a safe haven for you," said the earl. "Only wait until I have done with Black Billy. Until I do so, I would rather keep you under my eye, but in a day or two I will send you into the country."

"The country! La, what am I to do in the country? I'm sure there will be no amusing society there."

"I am sorry, Nell," he said. "But so it must be. I hope I can at least contrive some amusing company for you."

“To be sure, Sulky may come, if he does not die,” Nell agreed unexpectedly. “I’ve always had a fondness for Sulky.”

“Well, then, as soon as he is recovered enough for travelling you may both go together,” the earl promised. This assurance seemed wonderfully to buoy up Nell’s spirits, and she chattered throughout dinner of all the good jokes she had known of in Black Billy’s gang. It was enough to convince his lordship that with Nell’s testimony he might easily put a halter round the man’s neck, but he was still resolved to find some less drastic expedient.

## **Chapter 29**

“May I enquire, sir, just whither we are bound?” Miss Smythe asked. She had all during the first day of their journey kept to such topics as literature and the scenery through which they were passing, in deference to Mr. Newcombe’s obvious embarrassment, but by dinner time, as they repaired to an inn, she felt his nerves were tolerably quieted.

“To Cheswick, madam,” Newcombe said. He had not expected to escape this inquiry. Only the gracefulness of Miss Smythe’s conversation had prevented him from starting it himself. “It is my Lord Creasy’s estate near Ely.”

“We are going to his lordship’s estate?”

“Yes, madam.”

“Your employer’s estate.”

“Yes, madam.”

“The earl is either a most indulgent master or a very good friend to Mr. Warwick,” said Miss Smythe after a pause.

“He has been always regardful of me,” Newcombe said ruefully. “Whether he is a good friend to Mr. Warwick remains to be seen.”

“And is his lordship in the secret, and willing to shield us, or have you presumed on his generosity without his knowledge?”

“His lordship knows quite as much about it as any of us.”

“Mr. Newcombe, is Mr. Warwick the Earl of Creasy?” Newcombe looked unhappy, but bowed his acquiescence.

“Your quickness has discovered us, madam.”

“I confess I do not think I have been very quick. I ought to have suspected it before now,” Miss Smythe said. “Pray, why has he been at such pains to conceal his identity?”

“Madam, we have all a great deal to conceal.”

“Not from each other, surely.” Newcombe opened his mouth several times before he spoke.

“From each other, inevitably, as much as from the lawful authorities, I fear,” he said finally.

“Does Amelia know?” Miss Smythe asked.

“No, madam. It appears to me that it is above all with respect to Miss Loftus that his lordship prefers to keep his incognito.”

“Why is that?” Miss Smythe demanded sharply.

“I am not entirely certain. His lordship is frequently pleased to be humorous.”

“I do not find this particular humour much to my liking,” said Miss Smythe. A sudden notion made her relax her severity. “Is his lordship much inconvenienced by unmarried young ladies,

perhaps?"

Newcombe smiled back at her.

"I believe perhaps he is," he admitted. Miss Smythe laughed outright.

"And I once feared *he* was an adventurer attempting to insinuate himself into Amelia's good graces," she confessed. "If ever I find myself with too good an opinion of my own penetration, I need only mutter to myself, 'Lord Creasy', to be cured of it."

"Indeed, madam, I imagine you seldom require such a restorative," Newcombe replied. "When I consider the circumstances of our acquaintanceship, I fear it was only too natural a supposition."

"And what manner of establishment will we find at Cheswick?" Miss Smythe asked. Newcombe was abruptly restored to his uneasy restraint.

"It is a modern, commodious mansion," he said. "You will be quite comfortable there, and I may be sure of a welcome at the parsonage nearby."

"The parsonage! Are you not to have your part in this pleasant mansion?"

"Why, madam, it would not be fitting. Consider that there will be no one else but servants there."

"Mr. Newcombe, I should be sorry to turn you out of your own employer's house! I am not a giddy young girl, I am past the age or disposition I hope, where my good name requires such anxious solicitude. Do not forget, I am the governess, part of the domestic equipage."

Newcombe's face betrayed his honest surprise.

"Miss Smythe, I could not possibly think of you as part of the

domestic equipage.”

Miss Smythe was unaccountably ruffled by this unconsidered utterance. Newcombe hastened to enquire what dishes she would command from the bill of fare presented to them.

They passed the evening quite pleasantly in conversation, retired early to their beds and were early on their way. They came at mid-day to Cheswick. As the carriage swept up the drive through the park, Miss Smythe fell silent.

“Does it not please you, madam?” Newcombe said.

“Oh, sir, I have never seen such a house and such grounds in my life! I am quite overwhelmed. I am sure it will be enough to make me discontented for the rest of my life.” Miss Smythe spoke lightly, but Newcombe was able to detect the trace of a lament behind the jest, the more so since he shared Miss Smythe's dependent station.

“It is not always easy to be resigned to servitude in such splendid surroundings,” he said.

“Oh, Mr. Newcombe, I was not repining, I assure you. I have never had cause to do so. I have been a dependent, but in comfortable circumstances, and I have no doubt I will contrive to make some shift to support myself again.”

“The comfort does not entirely do away with the dependence,” Newcombe persisted. “You may be easy in small things and have your inclination fettered in great ones.”

“How so, sir?” Miss Smythe said.

“Why, a dependent may not always marry as he wishes,” Newcombe said.

Miss Smythe forced a laugh, although she looked as uncomfortable as he.

“Truth to tell, I have never expected to marry at all, so I have not been much incommoded in that direction,” she said. “And it is not dependent persons only who suffer such an inconvenience. Consider how my dear Amelia has been pressed to accept two different suitors to whom her feelings were unalterably opposed. I know of few instances where ladies were married from unobstructed inclination, and I daresay it is the same with gentlemen in many cases. How many matches are made with regard to family or money, and how few with regard to feeling!” Having shifted from the specific to the general, Miss Smythe was able to regain her composure, and Newcombe likewise.

“Indeed, his lordship, with all his advantages, has not ever been tempted into the married state,” he said. “So clearly wealth and independence cannot yet command all things.”

Some little delay and inconvenience were occasioned by their coming upon the household without warning, but it was perhaps as well to have some bustle over arrangements. It prevented them recurring to topics which were more solemn than their relations warranted.

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Mr. North was not a happy man.

“Prejudice,” he said to Mr. Haskell. “Prejudice is what it is. If I had laid such a chain of evidence before my superiors about some Mr. Brown or Mr. Jones, they'd not hesitate to take it up. But because it is my Lord Creasy, I am told I presume too far!”

Mr. Haskell clucked sympathetically.

“Consider, Georgie. His lordship knows Dick. His lordship knows Mrs. Cuthbert. His lordship, I'll be bound, knows Miss Smythe, although he denies it. I'm dead certain it's his house at Cheswick where she's hidden away, all to avoid being seen by young Frank

Upton. There we have them all connected, Miss Loftus to Miss Smythe, Miss Smythe to his lordship, his lordship to Mrs. Cuthbert, and all of them to Dick Gamble. And to top it off, his lordship behaved most mysteriously on the very day and time Dick escaped, driving his own coach, forsooth! And yet Mr. Jessup will not hear a word against him, and I am not to be going to the expense of taking Upton to look at Miss Smythe so far away as Cambridgeshire.”

“Even I grant you they are all in it together, sir, I don't see how it was done,” Mr. Haskell said.

“Do you not? Haven't you any notion?”

“Why, maybe this Mrs. Cuthbert who came out without going in was Dick himself, disguised for a lady! But sure, Frank says he can swear to Mrs. Cuthbert again. For all he says she was no beauty, he'd never have mistaken Dick's mug for a woman's. Then, Mr. Tilly, who we've never yet found out, is an accomplice to vouch for Dick at the gate, and brought him in the clothes too. But then I cannot see how the ladies come to be in on it.”

“Can you not? What if this Mrs. Cuthbert was the same Miss Smythe?” Mr. North urged.

“But she came out again with Miss Loftus. Sure, whether it's Mrs. Cuthbert came out without going in, or Miss Smythe came out twice and only went in once -”

“You'll never advance in your profession, Georgie, without you use your head for more than holding your wig in place. It's Dick who came out disguised as Miss Smythe, and Miss Smythe who came out disguised as Mrs. Cuthbert. And it's yon noble lord who arranged it all, I've no doubt, and carried Miss Loftus and Dick away in his coach, and has hidden Miss Smythe and Mrs. Cuthbert both away, so that Upton cannot swear to either of them. But I mean to get the better of him for all that.”

“How, Mr. North, if you cannot take Frank Upton to see the



governess?"

"I don't know, Georgie," said Mr. North. "But I mean to go to Ely myself as soon as ever I can, and I'll get to the bottom of this yet, never fear."

## Chapter 30

Dr. Osgood's predictions proved accurate. The fever broke in the night and by noon Sulky was able to receive visitors. The earl found him with Nell already in attendance. He paused in the doorway to observe her ladling soup into Sulky's mouth, and enjoyed this scene of unwonted domesticity for some moments unperceived.

"Oh, Mr. Warwick," said Sulky languidly. Nell poked him in the ribs and whispered energetically,

"My lord. You must call him 'my lord'".

"Oh, Mr. Warwick, my lord," Sulky resumed. "It's very kind in you to have brought me here."

"I was very glad to do so, Sulky, and I am still more so to see you so much improved."

"Oh! Aye, I did always expect to live to be nubbed."

The earl could not help laughing.

"I knew you would say just that, Sulky."

"Well, it must be true," Sulky said. "Though when I woke up in this room, all a-shining in the windows and curtains, I thought I must have died and gone to that place parson talks about. Excepting parson always says I'll go to the other place that ain't so

nice, so I thought maybe I was alive after all,” Sulky sank back in his pillows, quite worn out from the exertion of talking so much. Nell fussed about him.

“I will leave you now, Sulky. I have no wish to tire you out,” said the earl.

“Oh? Aye, it's very kind in you to come and see me, Mr. Warwick.”

“My lord,” Nell prompted again.

“My lord,” Sulky repeated obediently. He looked up at the earl. “I saw you just before I fell sick, down by the boats with Dick Gamble.”

The earl, half out of his chair, froze.

“Aye,” Sulky said, in the same rambling mournful tone in which all his confidences were couched. “I saw you.”

“Did you tell Black Billy of it, Sulky?” the earl asked, gently enough, but Sulky shrank at the sound of his chief's name.

“Oh? Aye, I told Black Billy right enough. I had to. We all have to do what Black Billy says.”

“And did you tell anyone else of it?” said the earl.

“Oh? Nay, Black Billy swore he'd stick me if I told a soul afore he ordered me.”

“And was there anyone else with you who saw me?” the earl asked, unable to entirely suppress a dawning hope.

“Oh? Nay, there wasn't nobody but me. Just me. I saw you and Dick.”

“Sulky, are you willing to do something for me, something of great importance to me?” the earl asked mildly.

“Oh!, Aye, you've been very kind to me, Mr. Warwick.”

“My lord,” Nell prompted.

“My lord,” Sulky repeated.

“Well, Sulky, as soon as you are well, I should like to send you into the country, to stay at my house there, where you will be well taken care of, with Nell to bear you company. Will you promise me to stay there and not to tell anyone else of how you saw me with Dick?”

“Oh! Aye, I'd like that fine. I grew up in the country,” Sulky said unexpectedly. “My brothers and me were all poachers afore we came to town and took up the filing lay. I'd like it fine to see trees and rabbits again.” A vague smile even hovered over Sulky's thin face. “But I'll have to tell when Black Billy says so. Everyone has to do what Black Billy says.”

“No, Sulky, I am going to make sure that Black Billy can't find you,” the earl said.. “Will you promise to tell no one else, if I keep Black Billy away from you?”

“Oh? Aye, I'd like that fine, Mr. Warwick.”

“My lord,” Nell whispered.

“My lord.”

His lordship rose and passed quietly from the room. He tried to maintain solicitude for Sulky foremost in his mind, but such could not long be the case. He strode out of the house. Sulky was Black Billy's witness, and if Sulky was not confused in his account, his only witness. The earl was moved even to hilarity, for, even if Sulky was so unlucky as to be Black Billy's tool again, it was likely his testimony would carry little weight. The earl pitied, and even liked Sulky, and had paid him enough attention to know that his observations were invariably precisely correct. But his

unremittingly doleful manner, and his continual litany of dire prophecy and lament, would prejudice any casual observer against him. If the earl could contrive, as he determined most seriously to do, that Sulky should remain forever beyond Black Billy's reach, the gang leader would be powerless to move against him. Whistling under his breath, the earl went briskly to meet his enemy.

He found Black Billy in the same room where he had last confronted him.

"Come to pay up, my lord?" Black Billy said, not moving from his seat.

"No, Mr. Thurl, I have not," his lordship replied. He settled himself on to one of the stools with as much dignity as he could muster. Mr. Thurl looked at him with polite interest.

"Come, sir, the balance of forces is altered since last we met," the earl continued. "Then you had Sulky under your command. Now he is in my hands and Nell, too. Either of them could testify to enough crimes to see you hanged ten times over. But I am content to let the matter rest – your silence for mine."

"And why should I leave Nell and Sulky in your hands, my lord?" Black Billy asked.

"Because I intend to see them well guarded and well away from London, and you will have no power to reach them," the earl said. "Come, sir, I offer you truce. I too can be ruthless. You had better agree."

"You will make no further move against me?" Black Billy said.

"If you make none against me or my friends, I will give you my word on it," the earl said. Then losing a little of his calm detachment, "But if you raise a finger against either of them or breathe a syllable against me, it is war to the death. You have shameless and cunning rogues at your command, but I have

money, power, influence and the credibility of a noble name, and I swear to you I will not scruple to use them if you provoke me. I will bring all the weight of the distinctions of the prevailing order down on your head if I must.”

“Come, my lord, do not let passion overcome your good judgement,” Black Billy said, sneering at last. “I have always known your gang is more powerful than mine. I cry quarter.”

The earl was even somewhat taken aback at the ease of his victory.

“You accept of my terms, then?” he asked.

“Of course, my lord. I cannot do otherwise,” Black Billy said. “I never held what I do hold but by bluff and bluster. You call my bluff and I am in your power. But do not think you can despise me. You cannot even do without me. I make the mob into a gang, and it is in your interests as much as mine that it should be only a gang and not a mob again.”

They stared at each other for a long moment.

“Well, Mr. Thurl, I freely acknowledge you have some scintilla of greatness about you,” the earl said at last. “Had chance so decided, you'd have made at least as good a lord as I.”

“Then I have the advantage of you, my lord,” Black Billy said. “For you'd not have made as good a chieftain among thieves as me.”

As much to his own surprise as Black Billy's, the earl held out his hand. They shook hands solemnly.

“Truce, then” the earl said.

“Truce,” Black Billy agreed.

The earl took his departure. His spirits were much lightened by this interview. Pondering with astonishment the grudging respect

he found in himself for Black Billy, he never noticed that two ragged figures were following him.

## **Chapter 31**

Upon his return home that evening, the earl found Dr. Osgood just taking his departure.

“Good evening, sir. You have been to see the patient? There has been no relapse, I hope.”

“On the contrary, my lord. He is mending so fast, I can hardly account for it, except to suspect his illness might have been in some part feigned.”

“I shouldn't be greatly surprised if that were so,” the earl said. “Sulky is a man who lives much in the imagination.”

Dr. Osgood looked a little surprised.

“I have not been accustomed to attributing intellectual qualities to persons of his order, my lord.”

It was the earl's turn to look surprised.

“Perhaps you mean that you are little used to see such qualities much cultivated in persons of his order,” he said mildly.

“I will not presume to have any opinion of the distinction, my lord.” The earl repressed a sigh.

“Will he soon be fit to travel?” he asked. “I design to send him into the country.”

“Indeed, my lord, I am sure he will benefit by such a generous design. I would not hesitate to move him even now, provided it be by easy stages.”

“Then I shall send him tomorrow,” said the earl.

Early the next day, the earl saw Nell and Sulky installed in a post-chaise to begin the journey to Cheswick. He sent also the most reliable of his postilions, partly as a guard and partly as nurse-maid.

“Take care of them, James. You know I have reason to value them.”

“Aye, my lord,” James said briefly. He had not forgotten the raid on Black Billy's house.

“So, do you keep an eye out for any suspicious characters. And also that Nell and Sulky are well attended when you stop for the night, for I do not think either of them capable of asserting their rights.”

“You may depend on me, my lord,” James said.

“That I have proof of already,” said his lordship, sending James on his way much pleased with this signal recognition. His satisfaction was almost as great as that of Ives and Mrs. Manson as the carriage drew away. Those two worthy retainers were so delighted with the departure of Nell and Sulky as to even cherish hopes that his lordship might recover in time from their baleful influence, and regain his customary hauteur.

The damage, however, seemed irrevocable. His lordship was much engaged in political matters just at this time, dining with the Duke of Richmond one night and the young Mr. Pitt the next, but he was yet so humorously considerate whenever his household did see him as to reduce both butler and housekeeper to dire forebodings.

Newcombe and Miss Smythe were strolling in the park when Sulky and Nell arrived.

“Oh, someone is come!” Miss Smythe said, catching a glimpse of

the carriage. "Oh, Mr. Newcombe, can it be the runners? You must conceal yourself, sir, it is of utmost importance that you not be recognized as 'Mr. Tilly'".

"Your alarms are needless, Miss Smythe. It is but Mistress Kelly, in the keeping of one of his lordship's servants."

"And who is Mistress Kelly?" Miss Smythe asked. Newcombe's face was immediately overlaid with the hues of the utmost embarrassment.

"I – I fear she is a person who does not deserve to be presented to you, madam," he said stiffly. Miss Smythe laughed at him.

"Come, sir, I conjecture she must be a friend of the earl's. You forget that I myself am that abandoned creature who assisted a highwayman to escape from prison. Let us go forward and meet them. Perhaps they have news of his lordship or Amelia."

Newcombe was compelled to accompany her. His sensations in doing so were not pleasant, for he feared Miss Smythe's sensibilities and her opinion of the earl were both about to receive a shock. He was also, he could not disguise from himself, a little peeved that their solitude was come to an end. They had spent two days in a companionable dawdling, with nothing to disturb their leisure but conjectures of what the earl and Mr. North might be doing, and in the elegance and peace of the park of Cheswick it was hard to be greatly alarmed. Miss Smythe had played to him on the pianoforte and attended him on lounging walks through the gardens and the wood, and Mr. Newcombe had found this strangely agreeable.

He nonetheless walked forward by her side, and they came up with the post chaise just as James was paying off the post boys. James saluted Mr. Newcombe.

"His lordship bid me give you this letter, sir," James said.

"Thank you, James. How did you leave his lordship?"



“Never better, sir.”

“You relieve my mind,” Newcombe said.

“Coo,” said Nell. “Another house even finer than the other. How many has he got then?”

“Five,” said James with vicarious pride.

“Coo,” Nell repeated. “Whatever would he need with so many? There's many folk would be glad of one.” She eyed Miss Smythe speculatively. Miss Smythe in turn considered Nell with suppressed amusement. She could not doubt she saw before her an instance of his lordship's continuing predilection for low company, but Newcombe, glancing up at her from the letter, was relieved to see no trace of outraged morality in Miss Smythe's expression.

“Miss Smythe, may I present Miss Nell Kelly,” he said. Nell curtsied. “And Sulky,” Newcombe added lamely. Sulky paid no heed, but continued to stare at his surroundings. Finally a grave smile came to his lips.

“It's very kind of Mr. Warwick to send me here.”

“His lordship,” Nell hissed, mortified at Sulky's disregard of proper forms.

“Oh? Aye, his lordship.”

“Well, Miss Smythe, his lordship bids me make them welcome,” Newcombe said.

“Then that is what we must do,” Miss Smythe said. “For how long are they to stay?”

“Indefinitely,” said Newcombe, continuing to read the letter. While he was thus employed, Miss Smythe addressed Nell.

“Miss Kelly, we must look out for apartments for you. What would you prefer?”

“Oh, la, madam, there's no need to 'Miss Kelly' me. I've never been 'Miss Kelly' in my life. It's Nell I'm called by.”

“Nell, then,” Miss Smythe said.

“Would there be some little cottage for Sulky and me? Sulky's talked all the way down how he used to live in a cottage. And I'd as lief be in a cottage as in another fine house, with servants looking down their noses, as if they could push me through the floor. They ain't got no call to give themselves airs.”

“No, indeed,” Miss Smythe concurred gravely. “There is in fact something like a cottage quite near here, still in the park, which is quite clean and in good repair. It is quite unfurnished however, so we shall have our work cut out to supply you with the necessities. We may begin immediately if you are at all inclined to do so.”

Miss Smythe was startled to see a look very little short of rapture on Nell's face.

“Oh, madam, I never thought to be setting up a house of my own.”

Miss Smythe was forced to turn away to hide a sudden gush of pity at this artless welling up of submerged domesticity. They began immediately and were busy all the afternoon, carrying furniture, kitchen articles and provisions to the cottage. Miss Smythe and Nell laboured mightily, for although they pressed Newcombe and James into service, Miss Smythe in her delicacy forbore to impose the assistance of any supercilious servants on her new acquaintance.

“Faith,” Nell said, looking round delightedly. “Nothing couldn't be snugger than that, I'm sure.”

Miss Smythe, surveying the two cots, table, two chairs and corresponding minimum of other equipment, could not agree, but

not for the world would she have diminished Nell's satisfaction by implied comparisons.

“Do you know how to cook, Nell?” she asked.

“Oh, la, madam, wasn't I once a kitchen maid? I can cook as well as anybody, for all I haven't done it in years. Sulky and me will be fine here.”

Miss Smythe looked at Sulky. He had not been required to carry or otherwise labour, in deference to his convalescent condition, but he had hovered nearby all afternoon, with a grave smile which only Nell was even partly in a position to appreciate as a sign of bewildered bliss.

Newcombe and Miss Smythe withdrew to the main house.

“I hope I have not superseded my authority in installing them there,” Miss Smythe said.

“Not at all, madam,” said Newcombe. “I am sure it will answer admirably. I have been quite amazed, for all I knew your generosity already, how exquisitely tactful you have been.”

Miss Smythe seemed quite overcome.

“Oh, Mr. Newcombe, you make me ashamed!” she said.

“How so?” he said.

“I have been used to consider myself as a charitable woman,” she said. “But I never knew until now how much of vanity and pride there was in my charity, how much it was for the gratification of my self-love, that I did good to others, how I – how I preyed on those less fortunate than myself. Mr. Newcombe, did you not see how *innocent* those two are? How delighted with the meanest habitation, and the prospect of quiet domesticity? Think how many of those we are used to condemn as hardened criminals may have hearts as open as Nell and Sulky!”

They walked on some way in silence.

“Mr. Newcombe, no matter what comes of it, I am glad to have been brought into contact with criminals and sinners. When I think how sternly I rebuked Amelia at first! I think quite differently now.”

“There are still criminals as hardened as we thought them,” Newcombe interposed gently. Miss Smythe stopped and looked at him.

“I know it, sir,” she said. “I am not about to run into sentimental excess over the moral superiority of the poor, I assure you. We have seen far more of wretchedness and degradation than of kindness or truth amongst them. Only I will no longer so fondly take on credit the moral superiority of the rich.”

The strolled on through the gathering gloom.

## **Chapter 32**

Very early the next morning, Nell and Sulky were likewise strolling through the park.

“I remember how we used to go poaching in places like this,” said Sulky. “My brothers was all great poachers. I weren’t nothing to the rest of them.”

“Well, you must not poach here, Sulky,” Nell said. “It’s his lordship sent you here and give you this pretty cottage. Fancy how the old crowd would stare to see Nell Kelly in a cottage!”

“Oh? Aye.” Sulky’s eye flickered to the wilderness on the edge of the park. “There’ll be rabbits in there,” he volunteered. He wandered in. Nell followed.

Abruptly a figure loomed up before them out of the ditch.

“Hullo, Ned,” Sulky said vaguely. Ned Quarrel disdained to answer. He seized Sulky and dragged him onto the road and into a waiting carriage.

Nell shrieked and scrambled up likewise onto the road. Only for a few steps did she run after the departing carriage, before perceiving that such pursuit was useless. She turned instead and re-entered the park, running with all her strength towards the main house.

Newcombe and Miss Smythe were just sitting down to breakfast when Nell burst in upon them. For some minutes her breath came in sobbing gasps and she could not speak.

“Ned!” she said at length. “Ned Quarrel. One of Black Billy's gang. He's dragged poor Sulky away in a carriage. Oh, sir, what can we do? Sulky has not spirit enough to help himself.”

The others were only for an instant rendered immobile by this dreadful intelligence. Then Newcombe rang the bell, called for James and in stammering haste sent him to saddle a horse and load a gun and attempt to overtake the carriage.

“What can Black Billy want with Sulky?” Nell demanded. Newcombe, who had been minutely informed of Sulky's value by the earl's letter, glanced at Miss Smythe, but receiving no encouragement, made no reply. Nell continued to lament.

Within the hour, James was back. He had followed as far as to Ely, and was satisfied by the evidence of ostlers and grooms that Ned and Sulky had relinquished the carriage and taken the common stage to London. He could gain no more precise intelligence of Sulky's condition during this transfer than that he had seemed as vague and mournful as ever.

“James, you must hasten to his lordship immediately,” Newcombe said. “On horseback, if you make all possible speed, you should overtake the stage – it is not beyond one day's journey. You must

go immediately and warn his lordship.”

Within a few minutes Newcombe had written a note to the earl, James had been supplied with a fresh horse and was gone.

“If only we knew what Mr. North was doing,” Newcombe said, unable entirely to keep back his anxiety from being seen. “I would give something to be on hand in London, even at the price of some danger.”

It was late that evening when James at length reached the earl's house, and to his vexation the earl was from home. He hastened to seek his lordship at Brooke's.

Mr. Charles James Fox was annoyed to have the earl called away in the midst of a heated defence of his parliamentary tactics, but when his lordship did not return, took up his dice box with philosophic resignation.

The earl read Newcombe's note. He looked over at James, his face darkening wrathfully.

“I thought I had settled with Black Billy,” said the earl. “I had best call on him again.”

“Take me with you, my lord!” said James, and as the earl did not immediately agree, added, “I have a brace of pistols with me, my lord. You cannot go there unprotected. Remember how we had to rescue you once before, my lord.”

The earl said,

“I suppose I must accept your services, James. I had thought Thurl's word might be trusted. The more fool I, I suppose.”

They left the elegant streets of fashionable London and made their way through the noisome quarters of the other London until they came to Black Billy's headquarters. The earl walked in, disdaining the formality of knocking and made his way unhesitatingly to

Black Billy's office.

The thieves' chieftain was engaged in commercial arrangements with two pick-pockets as the earl walked in. He glanced up, raising his eyebrows as he caught sight of his lordship's ireful countenance, but without appearing to notice, Black Billy completed his business and dismissed his two lackeys.

"I didn't think to see you again, my lord," Black Billy said.

"You cannot be greatly surprised to see me, however," said the earl.

"I confess I am unable to account for the honour, my lord," said Black Billy. The earl made an impatient gesture.

"Let us not fence, sir. Where is Sulky?"

"Sulky?" said Black Billy. "It is rather I who should ask you that, my lord, if I was not content to leave him in your hands."

"I have received word from Cheswick how your lieutenants seized him," said the earl. "It is pointless to maintain any pretence. Pray produce the poor wretch at once. If I get no satisfaction here my next call will be in Bow Street."

Black Billy's impassivity broke.

"What comedy is this?" he demanded angrily.

A noise without gave notice of more visitors. Ned Quarrel came in, dragging Sulky. The captive saw Black Billy and swooned away. There was a look of gloating satisfaction on Ned's face as he brought in his captive, but his glee did not survive his first sight of the earl.

Thurl strode forward and slapped his lieutenant's face.

"Have you gone mad?" he roared. Ned Quarrel was too

bewildered to resent the affront.

“I brought you Sulky, Billy” he said. “Sure, and I reckoned you'd be pleased.”

“And what advantage has it brought me,” Black Billy said, “save to bring his lordship down on me again? You're not fit for anything but being nubbed, Ned, and so you will be if ever you exceed your orders again.”

Ned gathered his forces sufficiently to feel insulted.

“I am a man of honour, sir,” he said. “I will not be spoken to in that tone.”

Black Billy slapped him again.

“You'll crawl away from here once you've begged my pardon,” Thurl said. “Man of honour, forsooth! You're a low, sneaking prig without the wit to keep yourself safe one day unless I carry you, sir.”

Ned whipped out a knife and lunged at his chief. Black Billy very coolly stood aside and tripped up his lieutenant. Ned sprawled to the floor. For an instant he scowled furiously up at his opponent and then began to scramble to his feet. Before he could rise, Black Billy kicked him in the ribs. Ned collapsed with a grunt.

The noise of battle had attracted more of the inhabitants. Two more rogues entered and stood in the threshold. They paid no attention to the earl or his servant's weapon, but froze, their eyes on the two combatants. Black Billy continued methodically to kick his fallen aide.

“Hold,” said the earl. Black Billy glared at him.

“Do you want to ruin me?” he bellowed. “I have not tampered with your followers. Leave me to deal with mine.”



“Do you think to cozen me?” the earl said, as angrily. “’Tis a very pretty scene, but I will not believe you had no hand in Sulky's abduction.”

“You fool!” Black Billy said. “I would not break my word to you, only to wind up in the dock.”

“Honour among thieves?” the earl sneered.

“Honour among thieves is maintained thus,” Black Billy said, kicking Ned again. “But I know the rules of the game, my lord, when I deal with those above me. ’Tis a game of skill, as well as chance, and I have not kept my position by risking more than I can gain. I know the odds.” He bestowed one final kick to the head. Ned sprawled unconscious. Black Billy bent down and took the knife from Ned's hand. He straightened again, panting a little, glaring at everyone in the room. His other followers, satisfied they had seen the conclusion of the mutiny, withdrew without speaking.

Black Billy tossed the knife down on the table, and strode up to the earl.

“Do you believe me?” he said.

“I think perhaps I do,” the earl said reluctantly.

“I gave no orders to molest Sulky,” Black Billy said. “I keep faith when ’tis in my interests to do so. As it is, this lout -” glancing angrily at Ned - “has outlived his usefulness. I dare not keep him by me and I dare not let him go. I cannot even see him hanged, for there would be too many days left to him when he might save himself by betraying me.”

“You cannot murder him in cold blood,” the earl protested.

“Can I not? How long do you think I would live if his insolence goes unpunished? You may threaten me, my lord, but will you save me?”

“Send him away somewhere,” said the earl.

“How will that help me?” Black Billy demanded. “I maintain my position by terror, my lord. My followers have not the wit to see that 'tis better for them that I keep them in order and set limits to their follies. There will be a dozen ready to challenge me if this one is not made an example, and it only requires a knife in the back to remove me, the same as any other man. And then the gang will not last a fortnight, for there is not one other with cunning to equal his ambition. They will all go their own way, and their own way leads to Tyburn. For their sakes as well as my own, Ned goes into the river tonight.”

The earl stood irresolute. The gang leader's fury could not fail to carry conviction – his lordship was quite convinced that Black Billy's grim assessment of consequences was well-founded. But he could not find it in himself to acquiesce in murder, even of a rogue who well deserved to end on the gallows.

“Take Sulky, and get out,” Black Billy said, still breathing heavily. “Show your face here no more if you have not the stomach for it.”

The earl turned to look at Sulky, and consequently did not see Ned suddenly rise from the floor, seize his knife from the table and lunge towards Black Billy a second time. At the same instant that the blade caught Thurl in the ribs, James fired. Ned dropped instantly, with the ball lodged in his heart. A look of horror came over the postilion's face and the pistol fell from his hand.

Black Billy reeled against the edge of the table. The earl rushed forward and caught hold of him, then lowered him into his chair.

“Now you're in for it,” Black Billy gasped.

“Are you badly hurt?” said the earl, easing him out of his coat.

“You'd better get out of it,” Black Billy said. The earl paid this no attention. He tore the back of Thurl's shirt to expose the wound.

“Tis only a scratch,” he said. He glanced down at the dead man on the floor and then at James.

“Oh, my God!” James said. “I never meant to fire! As God is my witness, my lord, I never meant to kill him.”

“I know,” the earl said curtly. He seized the bottle of spirits which had stood undisturbed all this time on the table and dashed some of the contents over Black Billy's wound. The gang leader winced but made no sound. “Help me bind up his wound.”

James tore his horrified gaze from his victim and moved shakily to the earl's assistance. When they had bound the wound with strips torn from his shirt, they lowered him gently back into his chair.

“You lose your labour, my lord,” Black Billy said. “When it comes to be known that it needed one of your gang to save me from one of my own I'll be done for, as much as if Ned had succeeded.”

“Then it won't be known,” the earl said. He scooped up the pistol and put it on the table before Thurl. “You shot Ned. James and I will both bear witness to that.”

They stared grimly at each other. Finally Black Billy broke into a laugh, although he winced again.

“We don't conduct trials in the same manner as you do, my lord,” he said. “Leave me the pistol and get on out of it yourself.”

“James, do you carry Sulky,” the earl said. The lackey turned like an automaton, still dazed at his own deed, and gathered up Sulky's thin form in his arms. Other denizens of the house were crowding together outside the door, staring at Ned's body. Thurl picked up the pistol and brandished it threateningly. However many of them realized that it was now discharged, their chief's scowl was sufficient to keep them out of the room.

The earl turned and regarded Black Billy once more.

“You have kept faith with me, sir, and so will I with you,” his lordship said finally. “I will make no move against you. But I will not be easy until I have found some means to so alter the existing order of things that there is no longer any place for you in it.”

Black Billy smiled derisively.

“If you do that, my lord, you will have to find other places for all the magistrates and judges and turnkeys in the kingdom, and Jack Ketch likewise. There will be a place for me so long as there is any place for them.”

“I doubt not but that you are in the right of it,” the earl said soberly. “Still I will strive for it.”

Black Billy leaned forward and poured a tot of spirits. He raised his glass.

“Adieu, my lord. If ever we meet again, I shall hope that we are already both thoroughly dead, and then you will know that you have been disappointed in your hopes of salvation.”

The earl turned and left the room. James followed with Sulky in his arms. Under Black Billy's scowl his followers silently made way for them.

The air was little fresher in the street than in the house, but Sulky revived as they emerged. James set him on his feet.

“Ned made me go with him,” Sulky said apologetically.

“I know,” the earl said. “James and I came to get you back as soon as we found out.”

“Oh? Aye, that's kind in you, Mr. Warwick,” Sulky said. “My lord,” he added.

“Can you walk now, Sulky?” the earl asked.

“Oh? Aye, I can walk well enough. I've always been good at walking.”

They set off down the narrow dank street. No hackney coaches or chairmen ventured into such places. The earl, however, seemed in no hurry to regain the well-lit squares, for he turned in to the first gin-palace they passed. Disregarding the stares of the other customers, he forced James to swallow a glass of spirits.

“I never meant to shoot him, my lord,” James reiterated.

“It makes no difference, James,” the earl said. “If you had not, he'd have had his throat cut before the night was over. 'Tis on my head, at any rate. Think no more about it.”

James shuddered.

“I'll have his face before me the rest of my life,” he declared. The earl forced another glass on him.

As the drink worked on him, James revived sufficiently to become aware that he was sitting and drinking with his employer in unprecedented familiarity. He stumbled hastily to his feet.

“My lord, it's not fitting!”

The earl laughed softly.

“Let's be on our way then,” he said, judging that this recollection signified his servant's recovery.

On his way home, his lordship remembered with a mild detached wonder that he had still to outwit Mr. North. With a suppressed sigh he contemplated, not for the first time, how much easier the remainder of his existence might have been if only he had never seen Dick Gamble. It was past hoping for, however, so he determined quite briskly to make the best of it.

## Chapter 33

Two days later the earl arrived at Cheswick with Sulky in tow. The commotion occasioned by his arrival soon brought Nell, Newcombe and Miss Smythe on the scene.

“Sulky!” Nell said, flying to embrace him. “I’m that glad to see you. Sure, I’d have wagered a pound that Black Billy would have stuck you.”

“Oh? Nay, he never did,” Sulky said, as vague as ever. He heaved a great sigh. “I like it here,” he confided. “I wish I didn’t have to keep going back and forth, though.”

“No more you need do so, Sulky,” said the earl. “You won’t be troubled with Ned Quarrel again.”

“Oh, can you be sure, my lord?” Nell asked. “I wouldn’t like to cross Ned Quarrel, no more than Black Billy himself. He’s a bad man to come up against.”

“Ned will never trouble anyone again,” the earl said. Nell caught his meaning immediately. She clapped her hands.

“Oh, did you kill him, my lord?”

“No – not I. But he is dead nonetheless.”

“That is good news,” Nell said. “Unless Black Billy took it unkindly,” she added with renewed anxiety.

“No, it – uh – it accorded quite well with Black Billy’s intentions.”

“And he won’t come after Sulky no more?”

“No. It was never Black Billy’s intention to capture Sulky. Ned was acting on his own authority. You need not fear any further

inconvenience on that score.”

Nell clapped her hands again.

“Come on, Sulky!” she said. “Let’s go home.”

“My lord, what of Mr. North?” Newcombe demanded, as soon as Nell and Sulky were out of earshot.

“I have heard no more of Mr. North since the occasion I described to you in my letter,” the earl said. “He has far more threads in his hands that I would have liked. I can only hope we can tangle this skein yet farther, faster than he can unravel it.” He looked at Miss Smythe, who curtsied and murmured,

“How do you, my lord?” The earl bowed in return.

“I trust your stay at Cheswick has been pleasant, madam,” he said.

“Barring a few little anxieties,” she replied.

“I suppose you could not maintain my incognito,” the earl said to Newcombe. “No, don’t apologize, Henry. It was folly in me to think you could.”

“My lord, I cannot even figure to myself why you would,” Newcombe said.

“Can you not? I am glad at least some of my schemes have not come undone,” the earl said. “I suppose likewise you have revealed the whole to Miss Loftus, madam.”

“No, my lord,” Miss Smythe said. “I wrote only as we at first agreed, extolling the kindness of my new employers.”

“Well, I hope it will serve,” his lordship said. “Providing, of course, Miss Loftus has comprehended that it was writ only to be shown to the runner.”

“I have no doubt of that, my lord,” Miss Smythe said, a little affronted. “Amelia is as quick as any of us.”

The earl laughed.

“I know it well, madam. Too quick for me, at any event.”

“My lord, can you tell us how it was you retrieved Sulky so promptly?” Newcombe said. The earl looked about him and said,

“Let us go in.” They regained one of the sitting rooms on the upper floor and the earl recounted briefly the occurrences in Black Billy's parlour. Miss Smythe turned pale and gasped, but made no other interruption.

“My lord, what do you intend to do about Black Billy?” Newcombe asked when he had done.

“Why, as I told you, Henry. I cannot yet perceive that there is anything I can do. Black Billy had the last word, and I fear will always have the last word.”

“But you cannot suffer such a dangerous criminal to go undetected,” Newcombe said.

“Can I not? If you can strike out any means whereby crime can be utterly swept away, I and the rest of the world will be eternally obliged to you,” the earl said. “But I am inclined to think that there is some merit in what he said to me. He is a rogue, a heartless rogue, who terrorizes and plunders his followers, but would they or we be any the better without him? Not, it is as he said – he sets some limits to their outrages for their own safety, and we would be wise to leave such a restraining force in place until we find a better.”

“I fear you are right, my lord,” Newcombe said after a pause.

“I am sure you are right, my lord,” Miss Smythe said. “And I feel more than ever how unreasonable it was for Amelia to embroil you



in Dick's rescue. We had no notion there was such a villain to take an interest in our scheme."

"All that is past praying for," said the earl. "Let us consider instead how we are to escape the consequences."

However willing his listeners were to fall in with this suggestion, they were not destined to oblige him.

"Mr. North," the servant announced, and Mr. North walked in to the room.

He surveyed the three of them briefly.

"My lord," he said, bowing. "I did not know I would have the honour to meet with you here."

"The honour is mine, sir," the earl said.

"Miss Smythe?" Mr. North said. "It gives me great satisfaction at last to encounter you."

Miss Smythe inclined her head in acknowledgement.

"My secretary, Mr. Newcombe," the earl interposed. Newcombe and Mr. North bowed to each other with great ceremony.

"I trust it will not inconvenience your lordship if I put certain questions to Miss Smythe?" Mr. North inquired politely. The earl shrugged. "I must confess being a little puzzled, madam, to know what has become of the Greenham family. It seemed such an advantageous post for you, to be sure, and yet I find you at his lordship's house, and can learn nothing of Mr. Greenham, however much I ask in Ely."

"There are no Greenhams, sir," Miss Smythe said defiantly.

"Fancy that!" Mr. North said. "It is certainly lamentable, since you wrote of them in such enthusiastic terms to Miss Loftus, that they

should have all been swept out of existence.”

“There never were any Greenhams, sir,” she said severely.

“Might I enquire why you then described them so positively in your letter to Miss Loftus?”

“Sir, I had no choice. It was his lordship's command.”

“Dear me! And what motive could his lordship have in this extraordinary charade?”

“A most sinister one, sir,” Miss Smythe said desperately. “he aims at my dear Amelia's honour.”

Mr. North remained in his posture of polite anticipation, darting only one glance at the earl. His lordship looked dangerously perturbed, but Mr. North was uncowed.

“By some means, I know not how, his lordship learned of Amelia's visit to Newgate,” Miss Smythe said, with only one shrinking look at the earl. “Sir, he threatens to reveal this impropriety to the whole world! This is the weapon he holds over my head. He has forced me to come here, and to maintain the fiction that I am normally employed, so that Amelia may be deprived of my support and my counsel. I can only pray that her virtue is sufficient to sustain her unaided.”

Mr. North looked from Miss Smythe to Newcombe to the earl. All three seemed overcome with emotion. Miss Smythe was blushing furiously, Newcombe looked utterly aghast, and his lordship seemed possessed equally by mortification and rage.

“My, my,” Mr. North said mildly. “And I thought you were here voluntarily to avoid my scrutiny! It just goes to show how mistaken we poor mortals can be. But perhaps, after this explanation, I can offer you my protection in returning to London?”

“Sir, it is very good of you,” Miss Smythe said. “But I fear such a course would be unavailing. His lordship's threats are still in operation and his villainy is beyond the reach of the law. I can have no hope except that his hard heart will at length be softened.”

“And is there no other information you might supply me, that would bring his lordship within reach of the law?”

“Oh that there were!” Miss Smythe said.

“And how do you suppose that his lordship came to know of your visit to Newgate?” Mr. North said.

“I cannot tell you, sir. I can only suppose that he had watch kept over Amelia, once his interest in her was aroused, and came to learn of it by spying out all our movements.”

“You did not in fact plan it with him?”

“Sir, you wrong me! Would I ever knowingly have placed my beloved Amelia in the power of such a man? I would sooner tear my heart out.”

The earl here contributed to the interview. His interjection was not articulate, but looking at his face, Mr. North was in no doubt that it was heartfelt.

“Well, well, well,” said Mr. North. “Here I thought I was engaged in an ordinary piece of business and I find myself in the middle of a real-life romance. Mr. Fielding couldn't have done better, I'm sure. I'm bound to say I'll have to go home and think the whole matter through again.”

He bowed to each of them in turn and left the room.

“Oh, my lord, I am so sorry!” Miss Smythe said. “I'm sure I would rather have died than say such disobliging things, but I could not think of anything better.” She collapsed into a chair.

In a voice thick with emotion, the earl said,

“Better! I do not perceive how you could have done worse.”

“My lord, you must not blame Miss Smythe,” Newcombe said. He crossed to her and took her hand protectively in both his own.

“Calm yourself, madam, I at least am certain you have risen nobly to the occasion.”

The earl stared at them balefully.

“And what if Mr. North spreads such a tale?” he demanded.

“My lord, he will not,” Newcombe said. “It was obvious he did not believe a word of it.”

“But if it comes to a public defence, it will have to be repeated. Madam, you will be the ruin of me.”

“My lord, it is no worse than what is said of a dozen other gentlemen, without impairing their social standing in the slightest,” Newcombe said.

“My social standing be damned!” the earl said. “It is my dignity I fear for. I will be a laughing stock. I will be a pattern for melodramatic buffoonery. I will be the man people will invite for the sake of seeing Miss Loftus heap scorn on me.”

He threw himself into a chair, groaned and hid his face in his hands. He was thus spared the sight of Newcombe and Miss Smythe looking at him in some perplexity.

“I am sure she will not do that, my lord,” Miss Smythe said.

“Then she will be ruined,” the earl said sternly. “Do you not see that if she is not disdainful, I must be supposed to be triumphant? You might at least have allowed that my intentions were honourable.”

“But then you would have had no motive to get me out of the way,” Miss Smythe pointed out. The earl stared at her. His indignation seemed to have exhausted itself, for abruptly he began to laugh. He laughed long and heartily and finally gasped,

“For my sins!”

“My lord, I must point out that if it ever comes to public discussion we are all ruined,” Newcombe said, dissolving into laughter likewise. It was long before they were in any condition to consider seriously of their position.

“I cannot like it that Mr. North is the man charged to investigate Dick's escape,” Miss Smythe said, growing sober at last. “He is far too intelligent to suit me. Oh, if only it had been some other officer that Mrs. Catchlove had first called in! I'm sure Mr. North could never have made his first discovery had he not realized that Amelia was the same lady who came to visit Dick in Newgate. Then he might have understood the whole plan perfectly well, but never have traced us.”

“At least he does not appear to suspect Mr. Newcombe,” the earl said. “That much at any rate is our gain. We can only now await to see how well Mrs. Cuthbert withstands his interrogation. On her is all our dependence.”

“Will she be equal to it, my lord?” Miss Smythe said.

“Why, I choose her beforehand as the most accomplished liar of my acquaintance,” the earl replied. “That, of course, was before I became better acquainted with you, ma'am.”

“My lord, I must beg you not to distress Miss Smythe unnecessarily,” Newcombe said. The earl looked at him in some surprise, but then smiled and said,

“I beg your pardon, Henry. You must put it down to anxiety. We can do no more now than wait for Mr. North to discover Mrs. Cuthbert.”

In the event, his lordship was correct, but they were fortunately not required to wait long. He had barely spoken before Mr. North and Mrs. Cuthbert were shown into the room.

“Madam, what an agreeable surprise,” said the earl to Mrs. Cuthbert. “I had heard you were in the country, but I had not supposed it was this country.”

“Well, my lord, I had gone down to visit my sister, but found her so confoundedly dull, that I decided to come back again, and I thought I would just take Cheswick in my way on the chance you might be here. I met Mr. North here in Ely, and he was so obliging as to inform me you were here, and even to insist on accompanying me. Most kind of him, I'm sure.”

Mr. North bowed his acknowledgement.

“How do you do, Mr. Newcombe,” Mrs. Cuthbert went on, apparently unaffected by the curious atmosphere of constraint in her hosts. “I declare, I have not seen you this age. Oh, my lord, I have never yet thanked you for procuring me the letter from Mr. Jessup! I did make use of it, you know, even though I was in a great hurry to leave town.”

“I am pleased to have been of assistance to you, madam,” said the earl, looking in truth wondrous pleased.

“My lord, so gallant!” Mrs. Cuthbert said. She now looked at Miss Smythe and the introductions were performed. Miss Smythe and Mrs. Cuthbert murmured their delight at becoming known to each other.

“You have not previously met Miss Smythe, madam?” Mr. North said.

“Oh, no,” Mrs Cuthbert said. “I could not have forgotten if I had, for I seldom meet any lady with a face quite as odd as my own.” She stopped and blushed scarlet. “Oh, Miss Smythe, I do beg your

pardon! Oh, my wretched tongue. Oh, I do pray you forgive me!”

“Indeed, madam, you tell me no more than I have learned every morning from my glass,” Miss Smythe said. “No, do not be overcome, I pray you. We who have odd faces must form a league and brazen it out together.”

“So you think you and Miss Smythe are similar in appearance?” Mr. North said.

“Why certainly,” Mrs. Cuthbert said. “The members of our league are frequently mistaken the one for the other, for the men have no more sense, sir, than to look only at the pretty damsels.”

Mr. North observed his last witness long and narrowly, but Mrs. Cuthbert disdained to notice how her observation was contradicted in practise.

“Well, I will intrude upon you no longer, my lord,” Mr. North said. “I’d not have done so a second time, but for the pleasure of Mrs. Cuthbert’s company.”

Mrs. Cuthbert tittered coquettishly.

“Mr. North, since you have been to so much trouble, may I not offer you my hospitality for the night?” the earl said. “I fear ’tis too late in the day for you to hope to reach London tonight. If I can prevail upon you to stay we may go up together tomorrow.”

“No, my lord, I fear I must decline,” Mr. North said. “I have not any time to waste.”

“Mrs. Cuthbert, you I hope will be more persuadable,” said the earl.

“My lord, I should be delighted,” Mrs. Cuthbert said, hesitating only so long as was required to give a sidelong glance at the runner. Mr. North, however, seemed unenlivened by her vivaciousness. He took his leave as smoothly as ever.

All four remained a moment suspended until he was gone. Then the earl caught Mrs. Cuthbert up in his arms and kissed her heartily on both cheeks.

“Betsy, you are incomparable,” he cried.

## **Chapter 34**

It was two days afterwards that the earl sustained another interview with Mr. North in his house in town.

“Why, Mr. North, you are become quite a fixture. Pray take a glass of wine.”

“Thank you, my lord, I don't mind if I do,” Mr. North said unexpectedly. His lordship poured two glasses and settled himself again in his chair.

“Can I assist you in some further enquiries, sir?”

“Why no, my lord. Today I've come to tell you a story. I've had so many from you and your friends, my lord, that I feel obliged to tell one as well.”

“Pray do, sir.”

“Why it all begins with a very rash young lady who rides off one night with a highwayman,” Mr. North said. “Now it might have ended in ruin and heartbreak, or as a romantic affair, but it does not. The highwayman turns the young lady over to a noble friend of his, who carries her safely home. That might also have been the end of it, but it is not. Quite by chance the young lady sees the highwayman arrested for some other crime, and resolves to help him.”



“She seems an improbably rash young lady,” the earl objected.

“Well, my lord, you could tell that better than I,” Mr. North said. “Being as how you are better acquainted with the ladies in general.”

“Pray go on.”

“The young lady enlists the aid of her governess, the noble gentleman who had already assisted her, and one other gentleman – perhaps the noble lord's secretary. They contrive a most ingenious scheme. The two ladies disguise themselves as maid servants and go to visit the highwayman in prison, where the lord has already been to put him in a private room, and prepare him to receive the ladies. One of these ladies, mark you, goes in with her handkerchief to her face, bewailing the highwayman's fate. Then two ladies come out again, the one still muffled in a handkerchief. Only it is the highwayman in the lady's clothes.”

“Tis rather far-fetched,” the earl said.

“Why, not in comparison with some tales I've heard, my lord.”

“Of course. Forgive the interruption.”

“Where was I? Oh, yes, now another visitor comes in. 'Tis the noble lord's secretary disguised as a dissenting minister. Now he, and the lady who was left behind, pretend to have met by chance, and both come out together, the gentleman vouching for the lady when the turnkey objects that he never saw her go in.”

“It relies too much on the credulity of this official,” the earl complained.

“On no, my lord, for the lady has a letter of introduction which she waves before the official. This letter was earlier procured by the noble lord, with elaborate foresight, for he even procured it in the name of the woman he had chosen to perjure herself for him later

on, if it should be necessary.”

“He sounds a menace to society,” said the earl.

“I believe that he is, my lord.”

After a brief pause, the earl said, “Go on.”

“The young lady and the highwayman have been taken up by his lordship in his coach, which he is driving himself to avoid the coachman being a witness. The highwayman changes his clothes again, and is spirited away somewhere. The escape has been successful.”

“And is that the end of it?”

“Not yet, my lord. The runner who is called in to investigate the highwayman's escape is naturally enough the same one who arrested him.”

“Naturally.”

“He questions the jailer and recognizes in the pretty young maid that same rash young lady whom he has seen twice before – once when he interviewed her first, and once when she happened to see the highwayman arrested. He discovers also, that the noble lord has been to see the highwayman, that the secretary has been to see the highwayman, and that there has been the curious incident of the lady who left with the secretary. He interviews the young lady and the lord, and they both admit visiting Newgate, but pretend to be unaware the highwayman has escaped. Indeed, the lord even goes again to visit him, and makes a great show of surprise that the highwayman is not there. Now the runner wishes to confront the governess with the turnkey, to establish that she in fact left with the secretary and not with the young lady. The governess however is at first ill and later has suddenly left town. The runner wishes also to confront the lady alleged to have left with the secretary, but she also has left town. He traces the governess and finds, sure enough, she has not gone as was said to a new post, but is lurking at the

lord's country house. She has, however, an explanation for this apparent inconsistency. A preposterous and unpleasant explanation, but an explanation nonetheless. Then the runner finds the other lady, whom the lord has hired to perjure herself and she performs her task to admiration. She even insinuates that the governess and she might be mistaken for each other, to throw doubt in advance on the turnkey's testimony."

"But the runner has unravelled the whole plot," the earl said. "And I make no doubt but he concludes his case successfully in the end."

"Unfortunately, my lord, the case is too involved for the comprehension of the magistrate. Instead of a commendation, the runner receives a rebuke for letting his fancy run away with him, and for doubting the noble lord's word."

"And is that the end of it?" asked the earl.

"That is the end of it," Mr. North said. For the first time the earl saw his expressionless face contort into an expression. The runner made a grimace of disgust. "Unless the criminals are so hardened by their success that they go on to worse follies," he added. "For the runner has his eye upon them, and they may not be so lucky another time."

"Indeed, they have had greater luck than they deserve," the earl agreed. "I am sure they will be prudent enough to desist."

"What think you of my story, my lord?"

"I think you have as much imagination as intelligence, sir, and more of both than your adversaries ever bargained for. I sincerely hope your promotion will not be impeded by such a story."

"Not for long, my lord."

"I regret we have met under circumstances that deny us the luxury of mutual confidence," the earl said.

“So do I regret it, my lord. I hope my tale is sufficiently cautionary to be useful.”

“There can be no doubt of it,” the earl said.

Mr. North rose to his feet.

“Au revoir, my lord.”

“Adieu, Mr. North.”

The earl sat unmoving for ten minutes after the runner had gone. Then he wrote two letters and sent them, one through the post to Cheswick and one by messenger to Amelia at Mrs. Catchlove's house. Finally with a light step he went through the clubs, seeking Rotherham.

“My lord, I have been most anxious to see you,” Rotherham said.

“How so, sir?” the earl asked.

“Jack, do not play the fool with me. Have you dealt with that rogue or not?”

“Oh, forgive me, Rotherham. So much has happened since we last dined together that I had quite forgot I owe you an explanation.”

“And are you now ready to enlighten me?”

“No, sir,” the earl said. “I fear I have yet some loose ends to tie up before I may untie my tongue.”

“Can you at least tell me whether you are still in trouble?” Rotherham asked.

“Oh, I am not in trouble – I think. I have come to an arrangement with Black Billy.”

“My lord, you are not suffering yourself to be bled by him, I hope.”

“No, Rotherham. The situation is altered. When you came to - uh – to my rescue, Black Billy might be said to have a knife to my throat. Now we may be said to have each of us a knife at the other's throat. I have convinced him to agree to a truce.” There was a pause.

“I do not like to think that your safety depends on the word of a cut-throat, my lord,” Rotherham said.

“And Black Billy does not like to think that his safety depends on my word,” the earl responded. “That is how the matter stands, however, and we can neither of us shift for fear of disturbing the balance.”

“I would not choose to live so,” Rotherham said.

“You already do,” the earl said. “So do we all. We who stand above the muck do so by balancing upon the backs of those beneath us. Let them ever decide to unbend their backs and stand straight, and we shall be tipped off into the kennel.”

“You've changed, my lord,” Rotherham said. “You never before took so dire a view. I am sorry for it.”

“I am not,” said the earl. “I feel like a man who has been walking a narrow bridge above an abyss in utter darkness. A sudden flash of lightning has revealed my situation to me. I had rather be frightened, and tread with care, than go insouciantly on and tumble into the abyss. Come, Rotherham, don't look so glum! I have managed my difficulties quite well. So long as his pledge is backed also by his own interest, I have no more hesitation at relying on Black Billy's word than on yours.”

Mr Rotherham smiled fleetingly.

“I do not believe I have any promises to you outstanding, my lord,” he said.

“Indeed you do,” the earl said. “You have promised me the honour of meeting Miss Loftus.”

“I thought that was rather an obligation I tried to impose on you, my lord,” Rotherham said. “Are you truly eager to meet her?”

“Yes, I am.”

Rotherham contemplated his friend. He could not quite account for his lordship's attitude, but he said merely,

“I believe Mrs. Catchlove and Miss Loftus are bid to dine along with us at Lady Farrington's. Would you wish me to procure you an invitation for after dinner?”

“Very much so. I shall be on my best behaviour, I assure you.”

## **Chapter 35**

Amelia had that morning sought the solitude of her bedchamber, as she had done for many mornings, whether to review her correspondence, or simply to sit and ponder. To Miss Smythe she owed what intelligence she had received about the battle to withstand Mr. North's penetration. For near a week she had had no letter from Mr. Warwick himself, and she felt very keenly that she was pushed aside, with no outlet for her anxieties.

Amelia sighed.

“Oh, miss, I am sorry to see you fretting,” Martha said.

“I am not fretting, Martha. Only I wish Miss Smythe were here.”

“Oh, miss, I am sure you are fretting,” Martha persisted. “You have hardly set foot outside the house in days. You sit here and

mope. Mrs. Catchlove is quite in a bother to know what ails you.”

“I had better go down, then,” Amelia said. “I have no wish to distress my aunt.” She went hastily from the room.

“Well, I declare, I am honoured you should favour me with your company, madam,” Mrs. Catchlove said.

“Oh, aunt, pray forgive me. I have been low in my spirits. I did not mean to neglect you. I rather thought I had better seclude myself than impose myself on you,” Amelia said. Mrs. Catchlove was not proof against her dejection.

“Oh, Amelia, you see now how foolish it is to toy with a gentleman's affections,” she said.

“If only you had accepted Sir Lancelot, you would not now be suffering the mortification of seeing him withdraw.”

“Has he withdrawn?” Amelia asked.

“My dear, there's no need to affect indifference to me. 'Pon my soul, I have seen it all. Why else should you be moped except that Sir Lancelot has cooled in his affection?”

Mrs. Catchlove was in no small degree surprised to hear Amelia laugh.

“Oh, aunt, that is not it, I assure you. I never even remarked Sir Lancelot's absence, and so little do I regret it, it is even the most cheering thing I have heard in days.”

“But then, why should you be so downcast, my dear? I'm sure you have hardly spoke in days. Depend upon it, my dear, you feel Sir Lancelot's defection, even if you have not figured it to yourself. Such a fine gentleman, such address, such polish! Now you see what comes of being so headstrong.”

“Really, aunt, I have never held Sir Lancelot in such esteem as you do. His attentions mortified me more than his indifference. Come,

let us agree our tastes are different. It is not Sir Lancelot or anyone like him who could have the power to affect my spirits.”

“La, Amelia, who is it then?”

To her annoyance Amelia felt herself blushing.

“There is no one, aunt. I have hardly been out of the house but in your company. You must know as well as I that there is no one.” Mrs. Catchlove laughed merrily.

“Faith, my dear, don't think to trick me. Did I not bring up a daughter of my own? Sure, Susan was always in love with the most ineligible men, and ten-to-one but it was some fellow I had never heard of. However, she married very well in the end, so do not let yourself be overset. Whoever he is, Amelia, someone else will drive him out of your head soon enough.”

Amelia was not so reassured as to make any reply.

“Indeed all young ladies seem fated to marry someone who is quite the opposite of all their gallants,” Mrs. Catchlove went on. “’Tis that I am sure that keeps the world going round. Fancy what would happen if everyone married their first love! Why, if ’twere so, I'd have been the butcher's wife, and Susan would be a footman's lady and not Lady Wickham. Confess now, Amelia, he is someone quite ineligible.”

“Oh, aunt, do not distress me by going on in this vein,” Amelia said.

“Faith, I'm sorry, my dear. I never meant to tease you. Sure, you must be desperately in love to take it so. But, then, if he is not completely ineligible perhaps he may make you an offer after all.”

“I do not want anyone to make me an offer,” Amelia burst out. “I am sick of offers.”

How Mrs. Catchlove might have responded to such a repudiation



of all proper sentiment will never be known, for at this moment the servant entered with a letter for Amelia. The hand was unknown to Mrs. Catchlove, but she saw Amelia change colour, gasp, and tear the envelope open with such haste as nearly to defeat her object.. Mrs. Catchlove was yet more amazed to see Amelia's spirits markedly lifted by what she read.

“Faith, my dear, who is it from?” Mrs. Catchlove said. Amelia became abruptly aware of her indiscretion.

“No one,” she blurted.

“Pon my soul you can't think I will believe you,” Mrs. Catchlove began merrily. Then, seeing how discomfited Amelia was, she was struck by a terrible conjecture.

“Amelia, is that letter from a gentleman? Have you been carrying on a correspondence?”

Amelia affected to laugh it off.

“Oh, aunt, it is not a love letter.”

“Amelia, a little flirtation is one thing, but to be corresponding with a gentleman is quite another! 'Pon my soul, I am surprised at you. I had thought Miss Smythe might have taught you better. Who is it has sent you this letter?”

Amelia was silent.

“Pray, may I look at this letter which is not a love-letter?” Mrs. Catchlove demanded sternly. She advanced upon Amelia who stood with the paper still in her hand. Amelia threw it into the fire.

“I declare, Amelia, you are an abandoned hussy! I am ready to drop! A clandestine correspondence going on in my own house!”

“I am sorry, aunt,” Amelia said. “There will be no more of it, I assure you. From what it said, there can be no doubt it is the last I

shall receive from – from him.”

“Sure, you never looked as if it was a rupture while you was reading it, my dear. And if 'tis so, why has he not sent back your letters?”

“'Tis not a rupture, aunt. 'Tis only the conclusion of our business.”

“Business? What business could you have? Amelia, you have not been borrowing money!”

Despite her confusion Amelia could not but laugh.

“Oh, no, aunt! But pray do not ask me what it was, for I cannot tell you, and 'tis certain you will never guess.”

Mrs. Catchlove stood amazed. Even in face of such a frank admission, she could hardly believe that Amelia had been guilty of such impropriety as to be in correspondence with a gentleman, and her hardihood in refusing to confess the purpose of it was sufficient to strike her aunt dumb. For two whole minutes did Mrs. Catchlove stand gaping, her hands clutched to her bosom, while Amelia struggled to look unconcerned. After all her adventures, to be caught so ludicrously!

“Sure, Amelia, if you have been so imprudent as to write to him, he'll never offer for you,” Mrs. Catchlove said sadly. “Such behaviour does not dispose a man to wish to make a lady his wife.”

Amelia flushed again. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that writing to Mr. Warwick was the least of her improprieties, but for some reason a gush of emotion prevented her speaking.

“But, aunt, I do assure you they were not love letters,” she reiterated finally. “I never expected Mr. - I never expected him to make me an offer.” Whereupon she burst into tears and fled the room.

She ran to her bedchamber and flung herself down upon her bed.

Mercifully Martha was not there, for Amelia could have accounted but ill for her emotion. Mr. Warwick's assurances that all danger was now passed should have sustained her even in face of her aunt's discovery, but somehow it did not console her.

Nor was she much calmer when Martha came to dress her for dinner at Lady Farrington's.

“Oh, Martha, I cannot go out tonight!”

In vain did Martha plead, and Mrs. Catchlove, summoned from her own toilette, remonstrate. Amelia insisted she could not bear to go into company tonight.

“It must have been a love affair,” Mrs. Catchlove said to herself as she made her solitary way to Lady Farrington's dinner party. “Else why should Amelia be so desperate down-hearted that it is over? And I never guessed. Sure, but I must attend to her more narrowly in future.”

Mrs. Catchlove was not long to cherish such thoughts, for besides the usual demands of politeness at dinner, there was even an earl amongst the company in the drawing room for tea. An earl who was dressed in all the glory of fashion and who was connected to some of the first men of the day. He even distinguished Mrs. Catchlove.

“I am sorry your niece should be unwell, madam, I have heard her praises sung by Mr. Rotherham, and had quite set my heart on meeting her tonight,” the earl said.

“La, my lord, won't Amelia be disconsolate to think she has missed such an honour! But pray do call upon us tomorrow. I am sure you will be most welcome.” The earl bowed his acknowledgement of this invitation and even looked gratified to receive it.

“Pon my faith, I am making headway at last,” Mrs. Catchlove exulted as she returned home. “An earl, no less! 'Tis most opportune. Sure, a lord is the very thing to put this other fellow

out of Amelia's head. What a lucky thing he should be so handsome, too!"

## Chapter 36

Amelia seemed little disposed, the next morning, to share in Mrs. Catchlove's glee.

"I don't give tuppence for a title," she said. "Why should this lord wish to call upon you, aunt?"

"I have told you already, my dear, he particularly wishes to meet you. La, Amelia, how can you be so indifferent? He said he had heard your praises sung so, he had quite set his heart upon meeting you."

"He sounds quite as much a coxcomb as Sir Lancelot's set," Amelia said. "Gentlemen will say all manner of gallant things with no meaning behind them. Depend upon it, this lord has no intention of calling upon us."

"Ah, poor dear, she is still in a taking at this other fellow," thought Mrs. Catchlove. "She must have believed his pretty protestations, and then found they did mean nothing."

Thus it was that when Mrs. Catchlove's confidence was vindicated, and the earl's card was brought to her, with a request sprawled upon it for a word with her alone, she spoke no word of triumph over Amelia's gloomy predictions, but hastened from the room directly.

"My lord, you do me too much honour," Mrs. Catchlove said as she bustled up to him where he stood waiting in the hall. "I declare, I cannot think what you wished to see me about *alone*."

"To beg you use your interest, madam, for a private interview with

Miss Loftus.”

“La, my lord, why should you wish to see Amelia in private?” The earl lost a little of his aplomb.

“Upon the usual motive, madam,” he said. Mrs. Catchlove stared at him.

“But you have not yet even met her,” she said.

“We have not been introduced, but I have seen her,” the earl said bravely. To his surprise Mrs. Catchlove looked dubious and hesitated to reply. “If I am in fact unacceptable to you or to Miss Loftus' parents, madam -” he began.

“Oh, faith, 'tis not me, but Amelia whose acceptance I mistrust,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “She has not been very accommodating up until now. She has never yet accepted anybody.”

“I must otherwise have abandoned all hope,” the earl said.

“Oh, to be sure, my lord! You could not hope to succeed if she were already engaged. But she is most contrary minded. 'Twas only yesterday she declared she was sick of offers and would never accept any!” The earl looked somewhat shaken at this.

“Nonetheless, madam, I desire to take my chance if you permit it.”

“Sure, you'd do better to wait, my lord.”

“But consider my unhappy suspense, madam.”

“Oh, certainly, my lord. Pray go in to her now, if such be your wish.” His lordship bowed and went in to Amelia.

“Oh, why could he not wait?” Mrs. Catchlove said to herself. “He might at least have spent a few days making love to bring her into a better humour.”

Amelia remained as Mrs. Catchlove had left her, brooding over the fire. She did not even look up when he entered, until his silence informed her that it was not her aunt returning.

“Oh, Mr. Warwick!” she said. She jumped up and came towards him, holding out her hand, looking at him earnestly. “How kind of you to come to me. I have been so longing to have someone to whom I might speak unreservedly.”

He took her hand and retained it, looking searchingly at her face.

“I am sorry you should have been left without any confidant,” he said. “But it was necessary to remove Miss Smythe and it might have been dangerous for us to meet.”

“Oh, Mr. Warwick, I am quite aware of that,” Amelia said. “I have learned at least enough prudence to know that it was useless to repine at necessary measures. But is the danger then entirely over?”

“As much as it can be,” he said. “Mr. North clearly has deduced enough of our actions that any further attempt to confound him would only bring us into danger of making a slip. He has seen all of us, even Mrs. Cuthbert, and we are saved only by his superiors refusing to believe him. I think we must be devoted to discretion all the rest of our lives – but the need for elaborate contrivances is past.”

“Then Miss Smythe may return? I shall be very glad to see her. You cannot imagine how I have felt, wondering every moment whether Mr. North had discovered her, and cut off from all communication.”

“Indeed I can imagine it very well.”

“Oh, yes, I suppose you can,” she said. “I do not mean to complain. But, pray, what account did she give to Mr. North of her sojourn in your house? You failed to explain that in your last letter, you know, and I have been racked with curiosity whenever I

could spare the time from-” Amelia elected not to elaborate on what other train of thought had occupied her.

“It is not worth repeating,” the earl said.

“Oh, come, Mr. Warwick, what better topic can you suggest? You had best tell me at once, for my aunt may be upon us at any moment.”

“Why, no, I – uh – I have your aunt's permission for a private interview.”

“But why should she grant it?” Amelia asked. “What does she think you mean to say to me?” Her eyes widened as she bethought herself of one of the things her aunt might think.

“Oh, you did not tell her you were come to make me an offer?” she cried.

“I fear I did, madam,” he said, smiling and once more taking her hand.

“But she does not even know you. Would she admit any stranger on such an errand?” Amelia said. “Yes, that is precisely what she would do. Oh, how ludicrous!”

“I must bow to your superior knowledge of your aunt's character as regards all possible strangers,” he said. “But in my own case I can testify that our little acquaintance was no obstacle to Mrs. Catchlove's support.”

“Oh!” said Amelia, suddenly serious again. “Am I now to tell my aunt I have rejected a third offer? How vexed she will be with me! Indeed, Mr. Warwick, it is not very gallant of you to put me in such a position.”

He stood frozen in the same posture, still holding her hand, while the blood forsook his face.

“Madam, I can only crave your pardon, for imposing so disagreeable a task on you,” he said with desperate formality. “Pray accept my best wishes for your future happiness.” He let go of her hand and turned abruptly to leave.

“Stay, Mr. Warwick,” Amelia said. “Oh, it is I who should beg your pardon! After all you have put up with from me, and all the expedients you have been forced upon to shield me, I am an ingrate to reproach you.” The earl turned and looked at her as if gulping down her words. A little colour came back into his face. “The comfort to me of your visit today is far greater than the inconvenience of supporting you in one expedient more.”

He stared at her as if hardly comprehending her meaning.

“But it was not an expedient,” he said. Amelia paled and stared at him in turn.

“Not an expedient! What else could it be? Mr. Warwick, are you – do you really mean – oh, do not make game of me, sir, I beg you.”

“Make game of you!” he said. He strode up to her and, as it seemed to Amelia, towered over her and she shrunk from him.

“I know very well what you must think of me,” she said miserably. “You have been privy to every outrage I have committed. I am not so little acquainted with the world as to imagine I could ever be raised even to commonplace respectability in your eyes.”

The earl began to laugh.

“Oh, my poor little Amelia, is that what you supposed?” he said. “In one respect only are you correct, madam, I could never think of you as commonplace. And so you thought I did not really mean to make you an offer, but only to hoax your aunt?” Amelia, unable to speak, nodded her head. “Come love, look at me.” He put a finger beneath her chin and caused her to raise her head to face him. “Amelia, I am sick nigh to death of eligible young ladies simpering and smiling. I could not possibly have loved you except for your



waywardness and your wild starts. You have done me the honour to be open and natural with me, not prim and proper, and how could I resist that?"

Amelia found her thoughts in utmost turmoil. It seemed to her that he had more than once uttered the word "love", and yet it hardly seemed possible. She could not speak, but she could look at him, avid for him to speak again.

"Oh, God, you are so beautiful!" he said, with sudden passionate intensity. "I cannot imagine doing without you, if you do not take pity on me now and marry me, I must follow you around like a spaniel and be laughed at. My love, can you find it in your heart to rescue me?"

Amelia was not yet entirely convinced that she was not dreaming, but she was able to perceive that he had asked a question which was susceptible of a yes or a no answer.

"Yes, yes, yes!" she cried. She flung herself into his arms, and by a curious coincidence they were very ready to receive her.

There was little coherent speech between them for some time, but even the most rapturous and most surprised of lovers must come to earth sometime. The earl, sitting at her feet in that position which was most convenient for resting his head upon his beloved's knee, was taken aback to hear Amelia say,

"Have you any money, my love?"

"Yes, a good deal of it," he said, too surprised for any elaboration.

"Oh, I'm glad," Amelia said. "For I have none at all, you know, but if you have enough for us to live upon, we need not fear my father's disapprobation." It here dawned upon his lordship that in the hurly-burly of courtship he had quite forgotten to acquaint her with what precisely he had to offer.

"I had not even thought of that," he said. "I have been very remiss

in proper forms, my love. I should have begun with a long speech about my position and my fortune.”

“And you should have been down on one knee too, I suppose,” she said.

“We may begin again if you like,” the earl said. He now first gave his mind to the consideration that she had accepted him instantly – barring a trifling misunderstanding – without knowing a syllable of his title or wealth, and wondered at how his happiness could be increased even in the first glowing moments of it.

Amelia laughed at him tenderly.

“No, we must be practical, my dear Warwick,” she said, failing utterly to infuse severity into her tone. “Shall we be off at once to Scotland, or shall we wait until I am of age?”

The earl looked unabashed.

“Do you think your father's consent unobtainable, then?” he asked.

“He was most specific how he would never consent to my marrying a fop or an upstart or a Whig,” she said. “If I had ever paid any heed to my father's opinions I am sure I should be rather distressed at it.”

“Never say you think me a fop,” he said indignantly.

“Oh, Warwick, how could I?”

“An upstart, then?”

“Well, I did meet you first in company with a highwayman,” she said. “What else was I to think? Not that it matters at all to me,” she hastened to assure him.

“I am confident of that, my love,” said the earl. “I am able to inform you that I doubt even your father would consider me an

upstart – but I must confess I am a Whig.”

“O dear!” she said. “I do suspect that in my father's opinion that is quite the worst of the three. But perhaps you are only slightly a Whig? Could you not be mistaken?”

“No,” he said. “There is no room for mistake. I have been very publicly and loudly Whiggish and cannot possibly retract now.”

“Never say you have sat in the House of Commons,” she cried. The earl choked.

“No, I have never sat there.”

“That's something at any rate,” Amelia said. “But I fear 'twill be too little to counteract the rest of it. Oh, my dear Warwick, I am very happy you should be a Whig, but my father will be obdurate, I fear.”

“Nonetheless, I shall try my best for his consent,” the earl said. “Then if my best is insufficient, we may wait until you are of age or we may fly to Gretna Green, my darling, just as you prefer.”

“Wait! Oh, I could not possibly wait so long,” Amelia said. This lack of fortitude, however, called forth only a renewed caress.

“Would it be long?” the earl asked.

“Quite until February!” she said.

There came a scratch at the door. Mrs. Catchlove's patience was at an end. Before they could move, she had bustled into the room, but such was the impudence of the lovers that neither made any move to relinquish their amorous pose.

“Pon my soul!” Mrs. Catchlove said. “Don't tell me she has accepted you!”

“I am happy to inform you that she has, madam,” the earl said,

taking a firm hold of Amelia's hand.

“Lord! Was ever anything so quick!” Mrs. Catchlove said. “To be sure, I never thought you would convince her. But you have dazzled her with wealth and position, I daresay. 'Tis as good a way as any to get a pretty girl to say yes. I do congratulate you, my lord.”

“My lord?” Amelia said. She looked from her aunt to her intended. He was looking remarkably sheepish for a successful lover.

“Did I forget to tell you?” he said.

## **Chapter 37**

“I never was so provoked,” Amelia said. “Could anything be so detestable as to leave me to be the last to learn he was a lord? And however much I upbraid him, he does nothing but laugh and declare that he was too busy to think of it. I shall never forgive him.” In token of which, she caressed his cheek idolatrously.

Miss Smythe and Mr. Newcombe laughed, but the earl was too busy returning softness to his love's wrath to make any answer.

“To be sure, I do not understand it,” Mrs. Catchlove said. “How ever did you overcome her reluctance, my lord, if she didn't know you was an earl? Though when I think how little impressed she was, when she might have been a baronet's lady - Still, I wonder you did not think to tell her she might be a countess.”

“It still seems very strange to me,” Amelia said. “I was so delighted at the prospect of being 'Mrs. Warwick', I do not know that there is not something more – more distant in becoming Countess of Creasy.”

“I am sure you will become reconciled to it in time, Amelia,” Miss

Smythe said. She stood up. "Mrs. Catchlove, I believe you have not yet been into the shrubbery," she said. "'Tis quite one of the wonders of Cheswick."

"Oh, to be sure," Mrs. Catchlove said. "Amelia, come along. 'Tis monstrous pretty to see you billing and cooing, but you have time enough before you. Lord! I was young once." The ladies went out. The earl watched Amelia out of the room and then turned to his secretary. Newcombe seized his employer's hand and shook it heartily.

"My lord, you don't know what joy it gives me to see you so happy."

"Thank you, Henry. I am happy – as happy as any mortal has the right to be. Now there is only Squire Loftus to be won over. And after setting the law at naught, and winning out over a bandit chieftain, I think I may even defy his Tory scruples."

"'Tis most likely he will be no more loathe than Mrs. Catchlove to call his daughter 'my lady'," Newcombe said.

"I fear you are in the right of it. It seems an unfair advantage. But I will not scruple to be as respectable in my happiness as I may be." The earl contemplated his secretary. "Marriage is a fine thing, now I come to think of it," he said. "I would have everyone marry. *You* should marry, Henry."

Mr. Newcombe turned red.

"My lord—"

"In fact, I am quite determined you shall," the earl said. "Though you need not be in as much haste as I. I believe we may very well contrive to keep Miss Smythe at Cheswick as long as is necessary."

Newcombe opened his mouth, but no sound issued forth.

"Go on, Henry! 'Tis very agreeable I assure you, quite worth the

anxieties incident on the asking. Then, if we can but get Mrs. Cuthbert buckled to the Newgate turnkey, there will be all the witnesses disposed of!”

His lordship had not only to bask in his lady's affections at Cheswick, however. Some weeks later he was on the docks at Bristol, in company with two sturdy young lads and a matron in a mob cap.

“Oh, my lord, I don't know how I can thank you, for all you've done for Dick and me,” Molly Gamble said.

“I am the greatest gainer from it, Mistress Gamble, I assure you. When I think what I might have missed but for Dick! Off with you now, 'tis the last boat.”

“God bless you, my lord!” she said. The earl remained on the dock until their boat had reached the ship and they had truly departed for Ireland. He then very deliberately turned his face towards Yorkshire.

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In the comfort of his own parlour, with Mrs. North opposite him at work on one of the endless supply of holes that the stockings of the little Norths provided, Mr. North was engaged in the perusal of his favourite newspaper. The formal notifications of marriages amongst the Quality seldom interested him, but a name caught his eye and he read with attention.

“Fancy that!” he said, digesting the pleasing intelligence that Amelia had quitted the name of Loftus. “So the young lady married the noble lord after all.”

“Is that the lord you went to see, my dear?” Mrs. North said sedately.

“Certainly it is,” Mr. North said. “He was most affable on all occasions. The very last time I saw him we sat down to a glass of

wine together.”

“Oh, my dear, how you do exaggerate! I declare I don't know how you expect to get on if you tell such tales.” Mr. North disdained to notice this gentle disbelief.

“So they are married,” he said. “I'm bound to say 'tis quite as good as a novel! I'm sure they'll get on together as fine as anything, too, for the one is as wild as the other. I'd give a guinea to see their first quarrel.”

“Oh, Mr. North,” said his good lady, “there they are just married and you talk of quarrelling! Well, from all you've told me, I'd be right pleased to be able to have a look at them.”

“Oh, yes,” Mr. North said, nodding to himself. “They'll bear watching, those two!”